Introduction

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The essays that appear in this publication were selected by the English 100 Committee from submissions from English 100 students from the Fall 2009 semester. The criteria used to evaluate and select these essays included content, originality, a sense of discovery and insight on the part of the student writer, control of form, language and sentence construction and representation of the various types of assignments students are engaged in while in this course.

ENG 100, Introduction to College Writing, is a developmental composition course designed for students who show signs of needing additional work on their college-level writing before starting the regular general education composition classes. In this course, students learn about and refine their writing process with a strong focus on the act of revision, engage in critical reading, thinking and writing and write both personal and text-based essays. ENG 100 prepares students for the rigors of college-level writing and introduces them to college expectations.

It is our hope that these student essays reflect the struggle and the joy, the hard work and the rewards that these students have experienced both in their lives and in the classroom. Furthermore, these essays reflect the diversity of our English 100 students and the uniqueness of this course. Our students are entering college straight out of high school and are returning to the classroom after years of work and family, come from urban and rural areas, and represent different races and cultures. And this work is truly their work -- the committee has not made any revisions or corrections to the essays. And as you read, we hope that you will discover the same things that the students have discovered: during their first semester in college they are discovering themselves, realizing that they are part of many communities and defining themselves as individuals, students, scholars and citizens.

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At present, very few people are reading to be inspired or to dream. The enjoyment of reading, or reading for pleasure has been replaced in our fast-paced society with the internet, and television. Reading is being taken for granted. Consider for a moment what life would be like if there weren’t books to read. There are civilizations in the world that don’t read because they don’t have access to books. That’s not the case though in America where I live. We have a wealth of knowledge right at our fingertips, but only a hand full of people find it. In the essay, “The Love of Books” by Gloria Naylor, she tells her story of how she came to love books when her mom took her to visit the library, and how reading inspired her to write (227). Libraries are filled with masterpieces that great authors toiled over to complete, but the pages in the books go untouched by many of us. Naylor had the advantage of learning the importance of reading early in her life, but that wasn’t my case because my mom didn’t instill the significance of reading in me; my reading experience has just begun in college where I am beginning to understand how literacy is crucial in life.

The significance of reading lessens with each passing decade. How can a society become smarter without reading timely literature? I would say that it depends on one’s definition of smart. We live in the world of high technology, and we have access to information within seconds through the world wide computer internet. Does that make us smart? The statistics say that as a country we are illiterate. Naylor lived in a different span of time. She was born in 1950 and was raised in Brooklyn, New York. Her family began as sharecroppers in Mississippi in the 1930’s. Her mother loved books, but recognized that being black in the south during that time made it impossible for her, or her children, to learn to read. Naylor recalled that her mom worked in the fields on her day off to earn extra money to buy books to read (227). It was crucial for Naylor’s mom to learn to read, and her desire for her children to get an education was so important, that she moved the family to New York City in 1949 because public education was open to blacks. When they arrived in New York City her mom realized the value of public libraries, and took her there often. She became very familiar with them, and her fascination with books grew (227). Naylor’s mom was smart when she utilized the public libraries to instill reading into her children. Not having much money the library provided an outlet for them, and access to a world of knowledge. Naylor became anxious to unlock the hidden mysteries within the books, and became quite at home in the library.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the case for me. My mom worked hard to provide the basic necessities for me, but she didn’t see the importance of reading. Having access to books was not necessary in our home. Reading was provided at school, and my mom believed that it was the teacher’s job to teach me how to read. The only library time that I experienced was at school. When I checked out a book from the library I didn’t read it. I skimmed through the pages to make a report that consisted of one short paragraph so I would receive the reading certificates. In elementary school, my teachers read briefly to us, but somehow I missed the significance of it. I can remember feeling bored and falling asleep when the teacher was reading to us in class. By taking the reading out of the home and placing it on the shoulders of the public education, have we really become smarter? Today our schools are filled with computers that are used for reading and research, and libraries go unused. The computers are also equipped to spell check and edit our writings for us so all one has to know is how to click a button. Technology affords us the opportunity to do things faster, but we are sacrificing the depth of learning that will benefit all of us over the ages.

If we, as a society, do not connect to literature by reading we are missing the very essence of our being. I believe that we were created to dream, and reading good books can stir up our emotions and open up the artistic nature within us. Naylor recalls her mother’s words, “The greatest sin is to keep people from learning to dream, and books teach the young how to dream” (227). Reading can allow us to visualize places where we haven’t been and fantasize about worlds that we have never experienced. Unfortunately, I didn’t learn this as a child. My parents were too busy working to dream. They never talked about experiencing life outside of our home or the city where we lived. I never imagined life any other way than what I saw day to day. My mom and dad missed the opportunity to escape their daily routine and venture into the imaginative writing of story telling, but I am beginning to find out how exciting reading can be.

Reading great literature can be a means of escape, but if we can connect to the story, reading can also free us to write from our own experiences. Naylor suggests, “Most writers first begin as avid readers. But a writer needs something else-- a conscious connection between the validity of their personal experiences and the page" (228). As a child some of the books she read such as Little Women and Little House on the Prairie allowed her to connect to the story-telling in an imaginative
world. Naylor’s reading experience helped her “avoid the feeling of being trapped within her home and within school” (227). As an adolescent she was timid. She enjoyed reading, but she struggled communicating with her family and teachers at school. Her mom gave her a diary that provided a way for her to express her emotions and helped her to let go of the pain she was experiencing. Her writing began as a way for her to release her anxious thoughts, but developed into imaginative supernatural tales; and for Naylor eventually became a way of connecting to others. As a child it may have been helpful to me to write down my feeling in a diary, but I began journaling several years ago as an adult when I received a journal as a Christmas present from my son’s girlfriend who at the time was a college student. How ironic it was that a college student gave me my first opportunity to start writing. Like Naylor, I made an account of my feelings by writing them down. Sometimes the entries were sad, and sometimes they were happy. I remember that I always felt good after I had written in the journal. Unlike Naylor though, I have never been inspired to write any further. When I was younger reading was absent in my life so I missed making the correlation with great authors, and becoming inspired to write. Everyone should strive to read objectively and allow the story to speak to them, thus allowing it to transform them.

Reading the essay from Naylor has helped me to view writing as an extension of reading. When Naylor enrolled in Brooklyn College she was exposed to black literature and female writers that helped develop the image that she needed. In Naylor’s essay she explains:

“Slowly, by completing my diet with these books, an outline was filled in. And that outline did not say that black was beautiful, it did not say that black was ugly. It said simply: you are. You exist. It reverberated enough to give me the courage to pick up the pen. And it’s what finally validated me” (230).

Naylor describes how reading books that she could identify with inspired her to become a writer. Writing as a college freshman for English class has been a challenge for me. After reading Naylor’s essay I can look at reading as being beneficial to writing and writing as a way of expressing myself.

In the essay, “The Love of Books” by Gloria Naylor fortunately for her she found her niche. Having the ability to read opened up writing for her as a means of expression and communicating. The very simple beginning of rambling in a diary showed her the way to touch thousands of people through her writings. Her first novel The Women of Brewster Place was “first written about herself and then as a love letter to the Black Woman in America”, but the book transcended across the world to other minority women including those in Japan and Korea. Naylor suggests, “You write where you are. It’s the only thing that you have to give” (230). That statement speaks volumes to me as I finish my last writing task for this class and look toward the next level of writing that awaits me. The challenge is taking the time to read respectable literature, but it is vital to us as individuals and as a country. Although I may not have learned that at an early age, I am grateful for the opportunity to have learned it in college; and to learn that writing can simply be a matter of just telling your story in a way that will touch people’s lives. Our aim or intention in reading should be to aspire to learn more about someone or something, and to relate to what you have learned.
To only consider the possibility of flunking a failing student seems unusual to me, after all, the education system designed the grading scale with an F in it. When a teacher passes a student that hasn’t mastered the most fundamental skills necessary in a class subject, it is a great disservice to that student, and our nation. In Mary Sherry’s “In Praise of the F Word,” she explains the problem of illiteracy in adults, and her own personal experience with a teacher proposing to flunk her son who was failing English class in high school. Sherry comments, “Our youngest, a world class charmer, did little to develop his intellectual talents but always got by” (215). The option of flunking a student who does not put forth sufficient effort, and doesn’t make improvement over a given period of time, should be exercised. I believe America’s schools are first rate, and each student must make the most of every opportunity to get the education that is offered to them; however, if they do not attempt to achieve the skills necessary to successfully gain the knowledge, then flunking should be the alternative. My parents did not give me the option of passing a class, a grade level, or graduating from high school without earning the grades; so I agree with Sherry’s “In Praise of the F Word,” because students that are passed through their courses and graduate without having the basic knowledge of reading, and writing will eventually regret not having those abilities as they try to succeed in life.

High school begins to offer independence to teen-age children, and this privilege when misused can conflict with their education, except when the student is allowed to advance in the school system despite their intellectual progress. Sherry acknowledges, “I am your basic do-gooder, and prior to teaching this class I blamed the poor academic skills our kids have today on drugs, divorce and other impediments to concentration necessary for doing well in school” (215). There are a lot of temptations that come with going to high school that can distract kids from learning. I can remember it being difficult watching my friends go to the movies and to parties while I was at home doing homework or preparing for a test. I knew the next day I would hear all about how much fun everyone had, and how I should have came along. School didn’t matter much to those that were partying because they would show up to class and sleep, or skip class altogether. To them it was more important to be hanging out with each other and having fun rather than considering the impact their actions would have on them later in their lives. Drinking alcohol and using drugs was available at my high school, but I didn’t want to smoke drugs or drink beer so some of the kids thought I was acting too good, or stuck up to hang out with them. They were the ones who were failing classes, and I knew that wasn’t what I wanted to do. As an adult-illiteracy teacher Sherry gets insight from her students about their unhappy high school encounters and one admitted, “I wish someone would have made me stop doing drugs and made me study,” and another student disclosed, “I liked to party and no one seemed to care” (215). If educators blame poor performance in school due to substance abuse behavior, and pass those students through the school system the outcome for the students can be devastating. Graduating unprepared has its disadvantages; like settling for a job that pays less money or performing a task on the job that they don’t want to do, and how unfair it is to cheat these students out of every opportunity to excel in life. Sherry confirms, “They will also discover they have been cheated by our educational system” (215). High school students cannot always see the dangers of not getting a proper education, and it is up to the educators to ensure each student is equipped to succeed after school, and to not allow the task of teaching rather than passing uneducated kids go unmet.

Each student should be motivated to learn by using all of the resource tools that are available. When a student doesn’t apply themselves then giving them an F may be appropriate; however, if the student has learning disabilities then the school should address those learning needs as well. Sherry’s experience working with drop out students leaves her with this impression, “Eventually a fortunate few will find their way into educational-repair shops… high school graduates and high school dropouts pursuing graduate-equivalency certificates will learn the skills they should have learned in school. They will also discover they have been cheated by our educational system” (215). Students need to receive a quality education, and not be robbed of the necessary preparation that will help them to become successful. I have a friend that experienced failing in high school, so she dropped out, and now she is trying to get her GED. Using F as a grade didn’t motivate her because she had not learned the fundamentals in elementary school, and she became further behind in high school. If she had failed in elementary school it may have helped her to be prepared for high school. I learned that when you get behind you are always trying to catch up by watching my brother get F’s in his high school classes, and seeing how hard it was for him to keep up with his work. He was fortunate by getting into a program for students with reading disabilities, and he got the individual attention that he needed to graduate. It is good
that our school system has developed programs for illiterate students in school and for those that have dropped out of school, but the fact still remains that hundreds of thousands of dollars are being poured into the school system each year only to pass elementary students from grade to grade without proper reading or writing skills. The process of low expectations should be stopped on the elementary level before it reaches high school. If educators don’t encourage the illiterate students to learn, after high school they soon discover that it may be too late because they lack some of the very fundamental skills necessary to compete in the job market place. Our country will continue to suffer if the students are not being prepared through proper education to enter the work force.

There has to be expectations and consequences in our school system. Without these vital two components our great nation will become a country of illiterate people. To ensure that this doesn’t transpire, it is necessary to keep the F in the grading system. Sherry summarizes, “Flunking as a regular policy has just as much merit today as it did two generations ago. We must review the threat of flunking and see it as it really is—a positive teaching tool” (216). Like Sherry I view flunking as being positive, “her son responded to the possibility of flunking by turning his grades around and finished out the semester with and A” (216). I believe it is even more effective when it begins in the elementary schools. The threat of not passing on with my classmates to the next grade in primary school made the most impression on me. Having to suffer the embarrassment of being held back a grade, and going through the next school year with my peers looking at me as a failure was enough to keep me from flunking. I carry that same fear with me today in college. As a nontraditional student the embarrassment of flunking out is worse than the amount of time and hard works that it takes for me to complete a writing assignment. When students understand what is required of them, and what the effects are of not meeting those conditions they will be more willing to apply themselves.

In the school grading system it has become apparent that the criteria for graduating students from high school has become relaxed, and the message that is being sent is that they can function without proper grammar skills after they graduate. I agree with Mary Sherry’s, “In Praise of the F Word,” because it is necessary to go back to the foundation of using the grade F as a motivation factor. “It would require holding teachers accountable for ensuring that the promotion of students is only through demonstation of the acquired skills, and gaining the support of the parents by educating them on how the children are at risk without a proper education is also important” (216). While it may be difficult at first to use the F as a grade to encourage students to work harder, the payoff in the long run would be worth it. Using the F again will make a powerful statement of the seriousness of education, and “the responsibility of succeeding will be put back on the students” (217). Succeeding in life is every person’s dream. Some may realize that early in their education pursuit, and take advantage of every opportunity given them to learn; others however may decide education isn’t important at the time only to wake up later to realize that they were wrong. Regardless, the responsibility of ensuring that each child has an education is up to the instructors, and every tool necessary should be utilized including the F.

Works Cited
The fear of failure can be a powerful tool that drives students to achieve their goals. In my experience as a student, I have always attacked my education most passionately when I was afraid of failing. Mary Sherry's "In Praise of the 'F' Word" is an essay where Sherry's son is confronted with failing English his senior year. The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls is a novel where she describes a childhood of poverty and the harsh times her family endured. The four Walls children were being led by parents who seemingly had no direction. With failure a part of everyday life, the pursuit of happiness depended upon success at school. The stories The Glass Castle and "In Praise of the F Word" show that it doesn't matter if it's on a small or large scale; the fear of failure is a motivator that can drive any student to succeed.

The threat of failure has affected us all to some degree in our lives. As students, this can happen just trying to pass a class. In high school, I was more concerned with hanging out with my friends and having a good time than making good grades, so I can relate to Sherry's son in "In Praise of the F Word." Sherry points out that she talked with her son's English teacher Mrs. Stiffer who told her that her son just sat at the back of the class talking to his friends. Mrs. Stiffer made it clear that she would fail Sherry's son if he didn't start doing better in class. I think Sherry realizes that the threat of failing, a little push in the right direction, is all her son needs. When she talks to her son she embraces this idea by writing: "She's going to flunk you,' I told my son. I did not discuss it any further. Suddenly English became a priority in his life. He finished out the semester with an A" (216). I like how Sherry didn't try to bail her son out. She let him deal with the problem on his own. He received a good lesson here: he learned to take responsibility for his education. Faced with failing, he found the drive he needed to succeed.

As a general rule, the failure to achieve certain goals academically will have a negative affect on us financially. Sherry talks about teaching basic grammar and writing in adult — literacy programs. The students in her class seem to be taking control over their academic lives. The goals they hope to achieve have a lot to do with their status economically. Sherry notes: 'They are motivated by the desire for a better job or the need to hang on to the one they got. They have a healthy fear of failure" (216). She explains about the idea that most students don't put school first until they perceive something is at stake. With their financial futures on the line, I know her students are taking their education very seriously. I can relate to this. Back in high school I was perfectly content on sailing by, and making C's without a care in the world. After working for the railroad for several years, I finally decided to go to college to pursue a different career. The decision to go back to school didn't come easy for me since I didn't make good grades when I attended high school. I can't fail because if I don't succeed at this, I have nothing else. The fear of failure is very real and for the first time in my life education is my top priority.

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls is a story where the Walls children were motivated by the failures they experienced and witnessed in their everyday lives. Their parents were the main source of their problems. Jeannette's father was the jack of all trades and had no trouble getting work but, was also a drunk that never kept a job very long. Her mother had a teaching degree and had no trouble getting a job as a teacher but, all she wanted to do was sit at home and paint. As a result, they had very little money to raise their kids on. They lived in dumps unfit for any child. Jeannette describes how they experienced borderline starvation and freezing, unfit clothing and sometimes no plumbing. One example of this is when Jeannette hid in the girl's bathroom during lunch time at school hoping for her chance to get some food. Jeannette Walls explains:

When other girls came in and threw away their lunch bags in the garbage pails, I'd go retrieve them. I couldn't get over the way kids tossed out all this perfectly good food: apples, hard-boiled eggs, packages of peanut-butter crackers, sliced pickles, half-pint cartons of milk, cheese sandwiches with just one bite taken out because the kid didn't like the pimentos in the cheese. I'd return to the stall and polish off my tasty finds (173).

I think it's awful that a kid should have to sift through the trash at school for food. Their parents had the means to do something about it but they didn't. The Walls children were bright kids that did well at school but it is not as if they had any choice. Education for these kids was about survival. They were determined to do well at school and gain the skills that they would need to succeed in life on their own.

When people become parents they have the responsibility to take care of their children and it isn't right to skip out on work just because they don't want to go. In The Glass Castle, Jeannette's mother had a job as a teacher but she didn't like it and decided that she just wasn't going to go. Walls address this problem:

It was hard for me to believe that this woman with her head under the blankets, feeling sorry for herself...
and boohooing like a five-year-old, was my mother. Mom was thirty-eight, not young but not old, either. In twenty-five years, I told myself, I’d be as old as she was now. I had no idea what my life would be like then, but as I gathered up my schoolbooks and walked out the door, I swore to myself that it would never be like Mom’s, that I would not be crying my eyes out in an unheated shack in some godforsaken holler.

Her mom was supposed to go to work but, instead, laid in bed crying about how much she hated her life. I’m sure there were many different occasions where my parents didn’t want to go to work either but they knew they had to support my brother and me. That’s just being a responsible parent. I don’t think the Walls kids wanted to continue living the way they had been living. Afraid that their lives could end up like this, the Walls children had all the motivation they needed to succeed.

If someone we look up to fails to achieve a goal, we may be afraid and lack the confidence to achieve our goals. In The Glass Castle Jeannette and her sister Lori had been saving money so that Lori could go to New York as soon as she graduated high school. They were both motivated to get out of Welch but Jeannette still had a couple years of school left. One day when Jeannette came home from babysitting and went to put some money in Lori’s New York fund she realized someone had broken into the piggy bank and taken all their money. They knew it was their father and Lori was shattered. Lori was having doubts of achieving her goal. Jeannette Walls explains: “I’ll never get out of here;’ Lori kept saying. ‘I’ll never get out of here.’ ‘You will,’ I said. ‘I swear it.’ I believed she would. Because I knew that if Lori never got out of Welch, neither would I” (229). I think it’s natural that Jeannette needs to see her sister succeed in achieving her goal. If Lori failed, Jeannette would have serious doubts about achieving her goals as well. All my life I have looked up to my brother. If he would have failed when he left home for college I would have been afraid that I could never do it, either. It’s always been like that for me. If my brother did well at something, I believed that I could do it, too. If he failed at something, my confidence for achieving that goal would be low. My brother excelled at school and all aspects of life thereafter which helps me with the confidence I need to achieve my personal goals.

Our experiences with failure teach us lessons on how to truly succeed. As for the Walls children, they all made it out of Welch and lived their own lives. The students in “In Praise of the ‘F’ Word” had the fear of failure motivating them to succeed. All students have to deal with failure, whether it’s the threat of failing a grade or just the failures we experience in our everyday lives. Out of all the things that motivate us, the fear of failure is a very powerful tool. It has never failed to motivate me.
My grandfather once said, “Cherish each moment you have with your loved ones because you never know when it might be your last.” As adolescents, most of us tend to ignore the importance of the advice our elders and loved ones give us. My grandfather always tried to teach me life’s lessons and cherishing the time I have with my loved ones may be the most important of all.

Grandpa was sitting at the picnic table enjoying the view. The green grass was sparkling with a light layer of dew. I was looking out the window of our early 1980’s model pop up camper at the snow peaked mountains in the back ground. The sun shone and a slight breeze made the leaves dance on the trees all around the camper. The lake down below was shielded from the wind by the mountains that surrounded it. It was like a giant mirror reflecting the trees and mountains that were directly in view behind it. Looking at the view, where did the earth stop and heaven begin?

It was mid June and my grandpa and I were on our third annual camping trip to Colorado. I was a skinny, nine year old little twerp at the time. My grandfather, who was in his mid fifties, was about 6’2” and still pretty solid. He had dark hair but gray streaks were starting to show. It was around 10 am when I came out of the camper to join Grandpa at the picnic table. He was sitting there peeling and eating an onion as he often did when he looked up to see me struggling to walk, still half asleep, to join him at the picnic table. He was smiling and shaking his head at me as he said, “You’re finally getting around?” Then he proceeded to tell me some story about how he got up at 5 am to feed and milk the cows and still got cleaned up in time to walk five miles to school.

A couple hours later, Grandpa made us some turkey sandwiches with a side of cheese flavored popcorn. Grandpa loved that cheese popcorn. Occasionally while we were eating, the wind would blow some of the popcorn off our plates into the grass. That’s when I realized we weren’t the only ones who liked it. We had two ground squirrels that were our neighbors for the week and they went nuts over it. For the next couple of hours we got a kick out of feeding them. They must have been used to campers because they would get within a few feet of us as long as we were feeding them popcorn. I would have been happy feeding those squirrels all day but we had planned to go for a hike on one of the mountain trails and, eventually, Grandpa talked me into it.

The next day I came up with a genius idea. I found a bucket that was in the camper and I took it outside. Then I went back into the camper and got a sack full of the cheese popcorn and took it outside. Grandpa must have known that I was up to no good but he didn’t say anything as he just came outside and sat at the picnic table and watched me. Next, I proceeded to lead a trail of the popcorn from the tree line up in to the bucket. I put quite a bit more popcorn inside the bucket thinking if one of those ground squirrels took the bait and actually got in the bucket to eat, I would have time to sneak up behind him, flip the bucket, and catch him. I hadn’t even finished setting the trap when I looked up and saw one of the ground squirrels munching on the trail of popcorn heading my way. It was like clockwork watching my plan unfold. When the squirrel worked his way up to the bucket he looked it over very suspiciously for a minute but, after a bit, he disregarded any risk and entered the bucket to claim his prize. Slowly, but surely, I inched my way to the bucket. I grabbed the sides of the bucket and as quickly as I could I flipped it over on to the ground. I heard a loud scream from the squirrel and the bucket exploded with movement. He was screaming and must have been running a million miles per hour in circles inside the bucket. Nothing could have prepared me for that screaming. I had never heard anything like it. It was like a war cry of some blood thirsty rampaging beast. My heart was about to pound through my chest and every hair on my body was trying to jump out of my skin. I had a death grip hold mashing the bucket to the ground because I knew if I let it go I was dead for sure. I looked up at Grandpa who must have already sensed my fear because he was laughing hysterically. He said, “What are you going to do now?” I never thought about what I would do if this plan worked but I told him to quit laughing and that it wasn’t funny. I was about to wet myself out of fear and I think grandpa was about to wet himself out of laughter. After about a minute which felt like an hour, I finally got the nerve to run for it. I turned to run when I heard the bucket fall on its side. That’s when I kicked in the after burners. Usaine Bolt couldn’t have beat me in a race to that camper door! I dove inside and slammed the door. Panting just inside the doorway, I could still hear Grandpa laughing hysterically outside. After a bit, and no mad squirrels in sight, I finally got the nerve to come back outside to join Grandpa who was still red faced and giggling. I tried to tell him that it wasn’t that funny but, eventually, I started laughing too. We talked and laughed about it for the next 10 minutes. I’m not sure I believed him but he told me that the squirrel was just as scared as I was and when the bucket fell over he made a bee line towards the trees. It didn’t mean that much to me
time but Grandpa said, “You will remember this day forever.”

That was the last time Grandpa and I went camping together. A few months after our trip, Grandpa had a heart attack and had to have surgery to put in a heart valve. The doctors told him he couldn’t participate in anything that would put too much strain on his body. Grandpa still thought it would be ok to go camping but my grandma put a stop to it. We still got to go fishing together as long as Grandpa promised not to lift anything heavy and to sit there and watch. This was better than nothing but I could tell something was different with Grandpa. He was like a wild lion that had been captured and put in a zoo. Caged and restricted, I could see it in his eyes. Part of the spirit dies over time.

Eventually, Grandpa got terminal cancer. I can’t remember the scenario exactly, but I think the cancer was attached to his liver and if they tried to remove it he would die. Unfortunately, there was nothing that could be done. The doctors didn’t give him very long to live which left only one thing to do: say our goodbyes.

I took a Tuesday off work to go hang out with Grandpa. I was 24 now and was working all the time for the railroad. I felt kind of bad because I hadn’t spent much time with him over the past couple of years. I walked in the house and saw Grandpa sitting in his chair. Grandma was out running errands so he was the only one home. He must have lost 50 pounds since the last time I saw him. He had dark circles around his eyes. He was wearing a robe that was desperately trying to hang on to his now skeletal form. There were tubes hooked to him coming out the bottom of his robe hooked to something beside his chair. I tried not to pay attention to them. I sat down and said “So are we going camping this June or does Grandma still got you whipped?” This got him to chuckle a little bit and immediately started story time. We talked and laughed for hours. Not once did we bring up cancer or his current condition. It was starting to get late in the evening and I needed to head back home as I had to work the next day. We were finishing up a few stories when Grandpa got all teary eyed. This was the only time in my life that I saw my grandfather cry. He straightened his face, looked at me and said, “Promise me something.” I said, “Anything.” He told me, “Do not be afraid to chase your dreams. You don’t want to look back on life with any regrets, and, most important, you cherish each moment you have with your loved ones because you never know when it might be your last.”

Grandpa passed away 2 weeks later. Even though he is gone his memories and teachings live on. I never forgot what he said and I continue to live by those words. Sometimes I get a little sad when I think about Grandpa being gone but then I start to laugh, as I take a trip down memory lane and recall the day we survived the attack of the killer squirrel.
Growing up I always wondered why anybody would want to read or write if they didn’t have to. It just didn’t make sense to me. What could be more boring than English? I called everything English. Reading, writing, nouns, verbs, punctuation in general—Yuck; it was all a drag to me! I knew it was important to be able to read and write but it wasn’t something that I looked forward to. I carried a negative attitude towards reading and writing all the way through high school.

I learned to read and write at my grandparent’s house. They used to babysit my cousin Natalie and me when we were real little. We would spend most of our time out playing or watching TV but at some point everyday Grandma would make us work on reading and writing. Grandma never taught at a school or anything but every night she would work up a school teacher like lesson plan for us to do the next day. On one hot summer day, Natalie and I played outside on a yellow Slip and Slide, diving down the watery runway like Willie Mays trying to steal home plate, when Grandma hollered for us to come inside and work on our lesson plan. Neither of us wanted to go inside so we acted like we didn’t hear her. I’m not sure what he hoped to accomplish other than putting off our lesson plan a few more minutes. If we had known that Grandpa had come home for lunch, we would have bolted in the house right away. We continued playing and a few minutes had gone by when Grandpa walked around the corner and we froze, like deer in head lights, we just stood there. Grandpa looked mad and he confirmed this when he said, “You get in that house or I’ll spank your ass till your nose bleeds.” I’m not sure how many spankings it takes before someone’s nose starts bleeding, but we didn’t stick around to find out. We entered the house and started our work. My negative attitude towards reading and writing all got started at my grandparent’s house. It was never something I wanted to do, rather something that I had to do.

I couldn’t comprehend how some kids enjoyed reading so much. In the third grade my teacher put me in the advanced reading group at school. In my class a girl named Heather Galloway absolutely loved to read. Skinny as a twig with long blonde hair, she always carried a big smile on her face while those big, blue eyes scanned the pages of her books almost like they searched for something. It would drive me crazy to see how enthused she got about reading. In “The lonely, Good Company of Books,” Richard Rodriguez read all of the time like Heather did. He talked about how he could hear his mother wondering, “What do you see in your books” (234)? That’s the way I felt about Heather. What did she see in those books? In our reading circle she would act so happy and it had me completely baffled. The outside covers of our books looked the same but she had to be reading something different. Later that year I found out that her mother taught high school English. Crazy reading genetics, it made sense to me after that.

Much like in “The Lonely, Good Company of Books,” my grade school rooms and hallways were filled with posters advertising reading. I was never buying what they were selling. Rodriguez talks about the posters on the walls and one that said, “Consider Books Your Best Friends.” I could relate to Rodriguez’s response when he said, “Friends? Reading was, at best, only a chore” (232). This is pretty much the way I felt about reading and writing all the way through high school. Every writing assignment felt like a chore. Every reading assignment felt like a chore. It always felt like work to me. It makes me wonder how many good books I probably read and didn’t even realize it because of my negativity about doing it in the first place.

Years later, while sitting on a train, I fell in love with reading. As a 24 year old conductor for the railroad of about a year, I found a lot of free time while sitting on trains. Two of us always worked together on a train, a conductor, and an engineer. Basically, we took trains from Kansas City to Parsons, Kansas. We would spend the night or day down there and bring trains back the next day. On this particular day, I worked alongside one of my favorite engineers, Scott Newell. Scott is a 6’6, 360 pound guy that played football for Kansas State. Calling him a big guy would be putting it lightly. We hadn’t moved our train for hours which made it seem like a never ending day. If a person experiences a traffic jam while driving a car, he can at least switch lanes on the railroad he is just stuck. Scott had buried himself in a book for the last couple of hours since we hadn’t moved. We were out in the sticks, too. It looked like the kind of place a person might see a hillbilly sitting on a stump, playing a banjo or something. On the verge of nodding off, Scott startled me when he tossed his book over and it landed in my lap. He
told me he finished it and that I should read it. When I asked him what it was about he told me it was a fiction and a thriller. Bored out of my mind, I decided why not. The book was *Amazonia*, by James Rollins. Right from the beginning, this book had me going. I couldn’t believe how I couldn’t put the book down. Before, I never cared for fiction, but the creativeness and the imagination of Rollins words had me hypnotized. Poisonous Parana Frogs, 200 pound killer Jaguars, 150 foot crocodiles and lots more had me turning pages like never before (294). I had to know what was going to happen next. I didn’t get any sleep for a couple of days until I finished the 530 page novel. Like nicotine to a smoker, I developed an addiction to reading almost over night.

I have a new found appreciation for writing as well as reading. Over the last couple of years, I have read every book Rollins has written and branched off to several other authors as well. I’m still a big fan of the thrillers though. In “The Lonely, Good Company of Books,” Rodriguez said, “I found reading a pleasurable activity. I came to enjoy the lonely, good company of books. Early on weekday mornings, I’d read in my bed” (234). I can relate with Rodriguez because I, too, came to enjoy the good company of books and I read in bed all of the time. Now, I look at writing as a gift. The way an author can draw me in with written words and keep me there fascinates me. When referring to the novels of Dickens, Rodriguez said, “I loved the feeling I got- after the first hundred pages-of being at home in a fictional world where I knew the names of the characters and cared about what was going to happen to them” (235). I felt very much the same way about all the Rollins books and several authors since. The talented authors have that gift of being able to drag a person into a whole other fictional world.

At the end of the day, I know I’ve come a long way from that boy who dreaded reading to this man who truly appreciates the written word. Over the last five years I’ve made up a list of about ten of my favorite authors. When I’ve read all their books, I try out a new author until they come out with another one. As I do this, my list of favorite authors keeps growing. When writing, I try to think creatively and use my imagination just like my favorite authors. My book store discount card gets pretty worn out these days. I like to make sure that I always have a few new books lying around so when I finish one I can grab another, turn the page, and begin a new adventure.

When I was seven I knew right from wrong; telling the truth was right, telling a lie was wrong. That’s how far I was on understanding the difference at that age. I never knew that there were so many wrongs that could play a role in my life growing up. I’ll never forget the day I stole fifty cents from the “Jerry’s Kids” foundation and how that fifty cents helped me understand how important it is to help handicapped kids and how wrong it is to steal.

I lived in St. Joseph with my dad, stepmom, three brothers, and two sisters. I was always having fun playing kick ball, tag, or just riding my bike in the neighborhood. With that many kids in the house I rarely got bored. We girls played a lot of Barbie dolls. The youngest had to be Kelly, and the oldest had to be Barbie. That left me with Ken. Ken was not that much fun to play with and he only had one outfit. We did a lot of fighting over many things, from toys to clothes. We always wanted what the others had.

We were all pretty rotten kids but Dad always said, “When it comes to being bad, you are the best.” We were all doing crazy pranks on one another; our parents even joined in on a few. One day I woke my little brother up and told him, “You got to get up; you are late for your first day of school.” I got him dressed and sent him off to school. It was April Fool’s Day, he was four, and it was a Saturday. I didn’t think he would really go, but he did. Later that morning when we couldn’t find him, I had to tell my dad what I had done. So dad went up to the school and there he was sitting on the front steps waiting for the other kids to show up. I can still feel the pain behind that one.

Once in a while our mom would ask one of the older kids to go to Seven Eleven to get her a pack of cigarettes. She always gave them fifty cents to a dollar to get some candy. I was never able to go; she said I was too young to walk to the store alone. The one who got to go to the station would come home with candy or my favorite, “Garbage Pail” cards. They would get five cards, a sicker, and a stick of gum for fifty cents. I could not wait until the day that one of my parents would ask me to go. I would get me a pack of cards, and when I would get back, I would show them off and tease the older kids about how they didn’t get to go, just like they teased me.
This particular day all of us kids and a few from the neighborhood were out playing kick ball. We had played kick ball for a few hours before we set up a scavenger hunt. After lunch we all left for our journeys, we were to do this hunt alone, and with no help. They all finished before me and insisted that they did it by themselves. I didn’t believe them, and threw a fit. After that I went and asked if I could help my dad work on our car.

When I asked if I could help with the car he had said yes, but wanted to know why I wasn’t outside playing with all the other kids. I told my dad the story of what had happened with the scavenger hunt, and he told me that if I helped him finish the car he would let me go get him cigarettes. I was so excited to be able to finally go I was trying to decide to get a lot of gum, or just one pack of cards. It didn’t take long for me to decide on the cards. The other kids wouldn’t be able to steal the cards as easy as they could steal the gum. After we finished the car it was starting to get a little dark. I asked if I could still go, he said, “If you are not scared to walk back in the dark you can.” He gave me two dollars and I was on my way.

On the way down there I was very excited but scared, because I had never walked anywhere alone after dark. I hurried up and got to the main street to cross and had to wait what felt like a very long time. Between being so excited and a little scared from the dark it felt like I would never be finished and get back home. Once I got my dad’s cigarettes I only had twenty-six cents left and I needed fifty cents to get my pack of cards. I was very disappointed, but I could not go home empty handed. They would laugh at me. I came up with a plan to get the fifty cents that was so desperately needed. The store had a wishing well that people would throw money in for Jerry’s kids. At that time I didn’t know who Jerry was, but if he needed help with his kids I’m sure my dad, Dave needed help with his. I didn’t know anyone who had as many kids as him. So I reached my hand down in to the well and grabbed a hand full of change, got out two quarters and threw the rest back. So I put my cards up on the counter and handed her my change. She counted out the amount needed and gave me back the rest. I was so excited that I had to open the car doors before I left the store, just to see what I had got.

When I left the station it was really dark, but I was not scared, I was just very excited to get home and show off my cards. My dad saw me bragging and teasing the others about me getting the pack of cards, and wanted to know how I got them. I told him about not having enough change and how they had that wishing well full of money by the counter that said “Help Jerry’s Kids”. I told him that no one had as many kids as him, and if Jerry needed help with his kids, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if I got fifty cent to help out. My dad got very angry, he made me take the cards back to the store and apologize for stealing. He spanked me on the way there and on the way back. When we got home he asked me if I knew what I did was wrong. I told him no, and asked him if it meant it was for helping Jerry and his kids only. He sat me down and explained what Jerry’s kid’s foundation was, and what it meant to steal. I asked a few questions, and when I understood what it meant I felt very ashamed for what I had done. I knew from then on that I would do whatever I could to help any kid in need.

Many things changed for me that day, as a child I was not allowed to go to the station alone. If something came up missing or misplaced it must have been me, I was the only thief in the house is what the others would say. If they weren’t calling me names they were pointing out people who were handicapped, and saying those were the people I stole from. I felt very bad for what I had done and started to see people differently. After all the name calling and teasing from my family, I was never able to stand back and allow anyone to tease others that were different in any way. I always felt bad for anyone who was different and wanted to do what I could to help them.

Now that I’m grown I look back on that day and laugh. I’m very thankful for my dad, who taught me that stealing is wrong and what it means to be special and in need. People always say that your kids are your pay back. I have not had to deal with stealing yet, but I just recently discovered that my son does not like people who are different. He says “Mom look at those people they look funny, are they stupid?” We have had our talks on what it means to be different, special, and handicapped. I just hope that I can teach him as well as my dad taught me, that if you are capable you should. There are two types of people, those who are special and that can help themselves like him, and those who are special and need help.
One of the most important objects that is in my life right at the moment is a wooden and glass display case with a gold, black, and white hockey jersey inside of it. I wore it all the way through high school with a badge of a captain on the left shoulder that I attained my senior year. It shows a few minor signs of wear and tear from body checks, diving for pucks across the ice, and deflecting who knows how many shots and passes. My jersey was given to me shortly after the end of my senior season came to an end. I was presented this jersey at an annual end of the season banquet. They were given to my friends and I as a reward for all the years of hard work, dedication, and sacrifice. There is no practical use for it anymore, yet it represents years of sacrifice and dedication.

I was first given this jersey my freshman year. I was very excited to get my jersey because I knew that we were receiving brand new ones that had a completely different design from the ones that we had used in years past and were different from the ones that the younger teams wore at that point in time. They looked just like the jerseys that many big time college teams and professional teams wore as well. I remember the first time I saw my jersey. It was Notre Dame Gold with two black stripes, separated by a white stripe in the middle of them, just a few inches from the bottom of the sleeves and just a few inches above the bottom of the jersey. It had our hockey association’s St. Joseph Griffons logo proudly displayed on the chest. The jersey has a lace-up collar just like the pros, with the number 63 on the back in big black numbers with white outline. I remember our jerseys were handed out just before our season opener, which also happened to be our first home game and my first game as a high school player.

I remember the day I was given my jersey as if it were yesterday. I was very nervous and excited from the moment I woke up until I stepped on the ice that night. We were playing long time rival Oak Park that night. Our coaches said every player on our team had earned the right to wear their jersey. They told us to remember anything worth having is worth fighting for and that whatever differences we may have off the ice do not matter because as Herb Brooks once said “The name on the front of the jersey means a hell of a lot more than the one on the back”. We went on to win that game in decisive fashion. This is the way that my best friends and I would approach the game from the first time we wore these jerseys, to the last time we took them off. In doing so, we acquired a league championship my freshman year and a reputation as one of the most tenacious and determined teams in the region.

We would go through the same general process of earning our jerseys at the beginning of every season, with a few differences. The biggest difference was that every year our coaches would push my teammates and I to our breaking points and beyond. Every year they pushed me harder and harder. We would skate sprint after sprint, blast through drills one after another and do our fair share of weight training, and plyometrics (exercises use to build explosiveness). I caught on fast that they used blood, sweat, and tears as indicators of just how bad we wanted to be on the team, earn our jerseys and our spot on the roster. This may sound crazy to most people but some of the happiest and most memorable times I’ve ever experienced were when I was drenched in sweat and covered in bruises fighting side by side on the ice with some of the best friends and I could ever ask for. However, just because a player had his jersey with his name on a roster, it didn’t mean that he could simply let down his level of intensity. They made it perfectly clear that if he did not want to put forth the effort at practice, then he would not play during the games. Our coaches made it clear that the players who worked the hardest were going to receive the most playing time, regardless of the level of talent a player might have.

Earning our jerseys quickly made my teammates and I play harder than anyone in the league, because we wanted to enjoy the reward of getting our share of playing time during games. We wanted to win as a result of all of our hard work. Since I was not alone in this effort, it helped me learn what it meant to be part of a team. I think that by going through all of this work to earn our jerseys, it made my team and I become more cohesive and tight knit, which led me to believe that being unified was the greatest strength that a team could possibly have.

At a glance, it may just seem like an ordinary hockey jersey to many people, but it is something much more significant to me. The jersey represents some of the happiest times of my life so far. It stands for a time where I have made friends and memories that I will carry for a lifetime, where I really learned what it meant to be part of a team, and that hard work does pay off. I also learned that work ethic can be just as important as natural ability, and that you can grow pretty close to someone when you shed enough blood, sweat, and tears with them. Now, whenever I am going through tough times, I just look at the jersey and it reminds me of better times and that if you give things your best, they tend to work out the way you want them to.
Growing up in poverty does not have to be a life sentence. Poverty can be overcome with hard work, a strong moral guideline, and a burning desire to get ahead. Unfortunately, more people are born into poverty than born into wealth. I, like many people, was born into poverty. Some people strive to get out of the unfortunate situations they were born into, while others wallow in it, and don’t seem to have the want or desire to climb out. I have always set my sights on rising above my given circumstances. Although I have striven to climb out of the poverty I lived with as a child, I have always lived with the fear that at anytime, circumstances could change and everything I’ve worked so hard for could be taken away in the blink of an eye. Just like Rick Bragg says in All Over But The Shoutin’ “if you really do grow up as what some people call “white trash”, you grow up knowing that it might all turn to shit at any second” (153).

I was born into a poor family, not dirt poor, just poor. We wore hand me down clothes; with seven children in a family, clothing was passed around. Most, if not all, of our clothing was either handmade or bought at garage sales. Although, I was one of the oldest children in the family, I was also one of the smallest; therefore, I was the last to get anything new unless my grandmother made it for me. As a child, my biggest insecurity was feeling like I wasn’t good enough because I never had the right clothes or shoes; our school supplies often came from the United Way. My biggest wish was to be just like the girls I went to school with. I wanted new clothes, art lessons, music lessons, gymnastic lessons: anything that would make me feel normal, not to stand out as just, another poor child. I remember in sixth grade it was a pair of trendy blue jeans that I wanted so desperately. The brand was called Jean Michelle. I remember begging for those jeans for my birthday; my mom just shook her head. There wasn’t enough money for new jeans. At Christmas that year my grandmother bought them for me. I remember strutting around in those jeans and even bragging to my grandmother that those jeans were what the rich girls at school wore. Just like Rick Bragg wrote about his new cowboy boots “I was so proud of them that I would sit with my feet splayed way out in the aisles so you couldn’t help but see them and sometimes trip over them” (76) Bragg said he wore his boots every day. Bragg states that “I was transformed. I had been little towheaded Ricky Bragg. Now I was Steve McQueen, ‘the bounty Hunter’. I was ‘Have Gun, Will Travel’ “(76). Like Bragg, I wore my new jeans like they were a fur coat. I wore them until they were threadbare. I made sure my jeans would not be passed down. They were mine.

Growing up poor, you either choose to climb above the unfortunate circumstances you were born into or you learn to live with going without. Rick Bragg wrote that “she didn’t want much, really, just something decent”, (36) he was referring to his mother not expecting a whole lot, just wanting a home of her own and not having to depend on other people. I have always felt that way. I never wanted to be rich. I just wanted to not be one of those “poor Sipes” girls. As children, my sister Lalena and I promised ourselves and each other that we would never raise our children in the same manner that we were raised. We would not live off of welfare or other people’s charity. Bragg talks about wanting to buy his mother a house but not wanting to buy it on credit because “the only thing worse than doing without is to be given something and then have it snatched away” (153). His mother had always been poor, “Poor was all she had ever witnessed, tasted, been” (152). If you are born poor you always live with the fear and insecurity that you could fall back on hard times. I don’t have any credit cards and choose not to use credit or loans unless absolutely necessary because of the fear of circumstances changing, and the possibility of sliding back into poverty.

Although my sister and I are not rich, we have risen above the poverty level that we were raised in. My sister Lalena is a school teacher, and her husband works in a factory. My husband also works in a factory and until recently, I worked as a kitchen manager, a cosmetologist, a seamstress or whatever job suited me at the moment. We both own our own homes, our children have all of their needs met and most of their wants. We have taken family vacations and the money is there if they want to be involved in sports, dance, or whatever they are interested in at the time.

I implied earlier that not all people born into poverty seem to have the desire to rise above their given circumstances. This is true in both my life and in the novel All Over but the Shoutin’. Bragg states that “the education he didn’t get so many years ago, as he fed that school’s coal furnace and plunged toilets to earn his free lunch, doomed him to manual labor”. (170) Bragg is referring to his brother Sam being doomed to work in the factories and fields to pay the bills. In my own life I too have siblings that seem to be content to live the lives of our parents, making some of the same mistakes. I never understood how they could not want more for themselves and for their children. The poverty I was raised in does not even begin to compare with the depth of poverty that some people live in. We didn’t have a lot, but we
had the basics, like food and shelter. My sister and I are living proof that being born into poverty; can be overcome and isn’t a life sentence.

Michelle Cordonnier

While reading several essays for my English 100 class, I began to compare the authors’ statements and feelings about reading and writing, to the way I have always felt about it. Two essays by two different authors’, “One Writer’s Beginnings” by Eudora Welty and “The Love of Books” by Gloria Naylor, struck me with the same feelings and some of the same experiences as I have felt in my own life. I love to read and write, and there is no bigger treasure to me than a good book. A good book can take you places. A good book can create a whole new world for you as a reader to explore. Books are not only for education but also a wonderful source of entertainment as well.

I can’t remember a time when I couldn’t read and write. It seems like I have always had the ability. I know I wasn’t born with the knowledge to read. I know this because I can remember being read to by my parents. I was just like Welty in “One Writer’s Beginnings”, who says “I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in or to be read to” (182). Her mother greatly appreciated reading and she taught Welty to love to read by reading to her constantly. Both my parents read to us and encouraged a love of books in all of us children. There was never a specific room set aside for reading. It was something we did in any room of the house. My mother read more for entertainment than for education. Welty says that her mother read mainly for entertainment purposes; she says “My mother read secondarily for information; she sank as a hedonist into novels” (183). I can honestly say that my love of reading came from my own mother. “In the Love Of Books” Naylor, like Welty says that “I elect to trace the untraceable, my passionate love of books and my affair with the written word, back to my mother, who was also an avid lover of books”(226). The author is saying that we do what our parents’ do, if they are readers, than their children will most likely be readers. I, like both authors of the essays, blame my mother for my love of reading and my inability to put down a good book.

I blame both of my parents for my complete, total fascination with libraries. As young children our mother took us on weekly trips to the library and when we got older, we took ourselves. Like Naylor states, “Because we grew up
without much money and a whole lot of dreams, we spent a great deal of time in the public libraries” (227). Naylor says she loved the feel and smell of the books in the libraries; I do also. When you grow up with seven siblings, movies and skating and such is out of the question, but going to the library and checking out as many books as you want to entertain yourself with is free. Naylor goes on to say “I literally read my way from the A’s to the Z’s in the children’s section of the library” (227). Naylor also says she read her way through several children’s series, from Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women series to Laura Ingall’s Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie series. I also can remember running out of books to read in the children’s section of our local library. I made my way upstairs to the adult section by the age of 11. Naylor’s mother took Naylor to the library often, as she called them, on ‘pilgrimages’. I always participated in the summer reading programs at the local library. I was always surprised that they offered rewards for reading books. I was amazed by the fact that people felt they needed a reward for reading, which I did for fun. For me, the story and the entertainment that reading provided was all the reward I needed. My favorite place at school was always the library or the classroom reading area, if there was one. Books were my friends. Being a shy child and moving around from school to school makes it difficult to make friends, so sometimes my best friends were my books. Comparing myself to Naylor, As an extremely shy child, Naylor and I both had trouble talking to other people so we read a lot. “I was a kid who read to the tune of a book a day”. (229) I read my way through several series of books, before moving upstairs to the adult section. My father was also an avid reader and encouraged his children to read, not so much for entertainment but for education. If you didn’t know the answer to something, “Look it up” was what we were told. He had his own personal library at home. It contained all types of educational tools, World atlas’s, several dictionaries, both foreign and domestic, Vietnamese books, from his years in the military, political books, medical journals, and books in languages I still don’t understand. Welty’s library at home contained a large variety of educational books. She says “I didn’t know then the clue they were to my father’s longing to see the rest of the world” (183). My father with his collections of atlas’s and foreign books: is like this as well. My father calls himself a “rambling man”. He loves to travel. Apparently, so did Welty’s father.

There have been several instances in my life where a book has gotten me into a bit of trouble. I have a problem with being so involved in the story being told, that I lose all concentration on everything around me but my book. One such incident occurred during my sixth grade year. One afternoon during silent work time I was reading to myself; as usual. Unknown to me the teacher had assigned a monitor to write down the names of anyone who talked. I was happily reading my book The Pinballs, I came upon a funny line in my book and I laughed out loud. The monitor wrote my name down for talking. ‘I wasn’t talking, I was reading. I was outraged and still am a little bit to this day that I was punished for doing something that wasn’t causing any problems and, in fact, was educational. I received a thirty minute detention for reading and enjoying the story it contained. Another such incident occurred when my son was almost three. My impish, little boy decided to give himself a haircut. I was so involved in my book I did not hear the clippers going, and he had to tug hard on my arm and tell me three times in his little voice “No, Mommy, I really want my hair”. My daughter and I looked up at him about the same time, as we gasped in shock, he stood there proudly with a smile on his face and a strip of hair shaved right down the middle of the top of his head, all the way to the skin. He had given himself a reverse “Mohawk”. I laughed until I cried. These are funny little stories that probably wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t love books as much. I believe that books enrich a person’s life, and I am forever grateful to my parents and certain teachers for their encouragement of my reading anything and everything around me.

I don’t really know why, but I didn’t even try to write in a creative sense until I was in high school. My freshman year I had an English teacher that handed out a lot of writing assignments as homework. She assigned many short stories and essays to write; she even had us write a chapter in a book. As these were my first attempts at creative writing, as you can imagine my grades were not the highest, but after writing these assignments, I began to realize that writing was fun. It was also a way of expressing myself; something that a shy person often has trouble doing verbally. I may never write a great literary work, but I can and will write for myself. My sophomore year in high school, I had a wonderful English teacher that greatly encouraged reading and personal writing for her students. She was what we called “a cool teacher”. She made learning fun; she made you want to read; she made me want to write. I enjoyed her class and learned quite a bit from her, so much in fact, that I took her class again my junior year and I also took creative writing with her. She ran our school’s literary magazine. My junior and senior years I had poetry published in the magazine, Images. Teachers like her and a few during grade school are what kept me in school, even when I had reasons to not be there. She encouraged us to write on our own time as well, write about anything, she would say, but just like Naylor says “You write where you are” (230) my teacher would say “Write what you know”. Both my teacher and Naylor were saying that in order to write an interesting article or story you need to either experience what you are writing about or research the subject.
Welty says, “When I read, I hear what’s on the page. I don’t know whose voice it is, but some voice is reading to me, and when I write my own stories, I hear it, too. I have a visual mind, and I see everything I write, but I have to hear the words when they’re put down”. (Paris review, Fall 1972) Welty later wrote her essay, “One Writer’s Beginnings” and wrote more in depth about the voice speaking in her head when she reads or writes. I too hear that voice when I am reading and when I am writing papers for my classes in college, or just writing a grocery list. I love to read and write and hope to finish school as a teacher of art or English or maybe both. I have mentioned the essays I read for English 100, “One Writer’s Beginning’s” and “The Love of Books” as being good comparison’s to the way I feel about reading and writing. Although I may not have agreed with everything they spoke about, I feel that some of their reasons and feelings were the same as mine. Like Naylor says “if you are fortunate enough, there is a spark that will somehow ignite a work so that touches almost anyone who reads it, although it is about a very specific people at a very specific time”(231). She is saying that if something is written well enough, it will affect many people and will stand the test of time. I have to agree with that statement; books span generations, stories that were written well over fifty years before I was even born have touched me, have reached me in some way.
might have. Your watcher may also be when you try to make something sound really good, and then you run out of fresh original ideas. “Whenever you get a really good sentence you should stop in the middle of it and go on tomorrow. Otherwise you might run dry” (Godwin 223). Godwin’s watcher stopped her from writing the exciting attention grabbing things. My Watcher that I have discovered stops me from writing about my family. My Watcher is almost a member of my family, because I know none of them will ever have the chance to read my writings, I know I never have to share anything I write with them, but my Watcher never allows me to put it down on paper. My Watcher won’t let me say that I don’t want to be that girl married to the guy who beats her, or the girl with a child at seventeen, or the girl that takes pill after pill to make the pain go away. My Watcher isn’t scared I’ll fail, unlike Godwin’s Watcher. “‘On a very bad day I once wrote my Watcher a letter. ‘Dear Watcher,’ I wrote, ‘What is it you’re so afraid I’ll do?’ Then I held his pen for him, and he replied instantly with a candor that has kept me from truly despising him. ‘Fail,’ he wrote back” (Godwin 224). After Godwin realized why her Watcher was scared, she was okay with it, because he simply didn’t want to fail, she didn’t believe in failure. My Watcher could be my Dad. When I would never put it on paper how hurt I was when we could no longer play our guitars together, because he needed pot money. My watcher could also be my Mom, I’m thankful for all the things she’s provided me with, but in any piece of writing I couldn’t tell how much I envied kids in school who could go home and get help from their parents, when I went home to my Mom, all my homework was some foreign language to her, I never could understand why I couldn’t get help from my Mom, but other students could.

Like Douglass I have discovered the power of literacy and language. Douglass discovered early on that as a slave he is useless with knowledge. Douglass self taught himself, because he knew it was his only way to be set free into the world. Along with teaching himself, he had help with kids off the street. “When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by does one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return” (Douglass 139). The freedom I will gain from literacy, will be communication skills, I plan to receive a degree in Criminal Justice, so in a few years, I’ll be able to understand the language of the law. Then I’ll be set free from my family, I’ll be able to help my kids with their homework, and hopefully they’ll want to be like me. Like Douglass I have once envied those around me because of their lack of intelligence. Knowing the things Douglass knew about how white’s really felt about slaves sickened him from reading things like the newspaper. “In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity” (Douglass 140). Most of my family didn’t graduate high school, so when I’m around them in conversation it’s obvious the education they lack. Sometimes even when I use certain words with my mom, she asks me the definition of the word, so I often wonder what it would be like if I had her intelligence, maybe we would understand each other more? My dad always tells me, “Sorry but I ain’t got nothin for ya they done took all my money in that damn child support.” For me, I hear the bad grammar now, before I heard how pathetic he is as a Father, failing to provide, however when I was younger I never caught the bad grammar in it.

I feel fortunate to have been born into this generation, where unlike my grandma’s time of growing up, rights are equal between genders, for education and careers. Her highest education completed was the ninth grade, with no intentions of getting her GED to later further her education, but later regrets it. She had easy access to books in the house, text books, children’s books, novels, and even Bibles laid around. During the interview she told me that her brothers were pushed harder towards their education than the girls were. “Boys were expected to do their best in school and girls were expected to have all their chores completed.” The girls were expected to do almost all of the chores, leaving the boys with a few outside chores. My grandma told me how much she regrets not staying in school. She told me last year at election time she got lost in the speeches, because they used words and phrases she couldn’t define. She believes literacy has changed tremendously since she was in school. She says she’s not sure if technology has helped or if the teachers aren’t as strict on this generation. My grandmother says she’s proud of me for the enormous steps I have taken in my education that nobody else in my family has done until now with my cousin who is the same age as me, and myself, were the first to make it this far, and this is only the beginning of a new era for my family. For me, I don’t want my grandkids to see me as “what they don’t want to be.” Instead I want them to look up to me, strive for success just like I am, and take every step, and every offer for higher education and literacy. As my grandma rose her own kids (my dad and two uncles) she didn’t put any pressure on them during school, they lived across the street from a library so when her three boys were young she would take them over there nearly every day. All three of the boys dropped out of high school before completing tenth grade, with only one (my uncle) going back and receiving his GED. So she encouraged but didn’t press the issue of education. If I give in to the idea of marriage, and have a family, none of my kids will be drop outs. None of them will let someone down because of drugs either. I can’t say my Grandma didn’t raise my Dad and Uncles right, but I can say she gave them the easy access to alcohol. Alcohol became all they wanted, they smothered themselves with it, and that’s all they cared/care about; therefore they never received the power of literacy. Going around that family in conversation is a completely different language.
Douglass, Godwin, and I all have one thing in common...we all want to read, write, and be free. Douglass became a free slave from the power of knowledge; Godwin became free once she overcame her Watcher. However my grandmother is still enslaved from knowledge, she can read and write, but not the way I can, she can’t critically read and write. For me I can read and write, but I still have trouble pushing my Watcher away, and I’m still developing into a critical thinker. There will always be someone who we have more knowledge or less knowledge than, but the more you have, the bigger your ticket to freedom becomes. When it comes to my future in literacy I’ll have the power to catch the attention of people in my voice and in the way I’ll speak through my vocabulary.

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Looking back on my life I can recall many stories: from learning to ride a bike or learning to play football or even my first kiss. I know all these stories helped to get me to where I am today but for some reason I don't really remember the stories that really matter like learning a to read or my mom reading to me. Learning was never really big in my home, my family expected me to do well in school but they also expected the school to do all the work. I can recall Sunday afternoons when I had homework to do I would put aside my work to join in the families kickball game after church. No one ever questioned me about school work as much as they praised me for a home run in the kickball game, so I felt like what I was doing was right. Being a man of color in America you see two images of black men the rapper/ gangster who has no respect for himself or anyone else and then you have the athlete willing to work to be the best at a sport. It's hard to be a black man in America when you're trying to go against the norm because when you get weak you don't have many places to look for help or to see a success story. One story we can look to is that of Fredrick Douglass, a runaway slave turned abolitionist. In Douglas's essay "How I Learned to Read and Write" he discusses all the things he had to rise above to learn to read and write and he also talks about the power of reading. Douglas and I both agree that education is the key to help open many doors in any man's life but you must have that mindset ready for change and you must not be afraid to be different.

I remember all the time as a child hearing kids on my block saying "I want to be like Mike." I can understand why when you see MJ you see he has it all: the money, the cars and the clothes; in the eyes of a young black man that is what success is. This is half true, I say half true because the status quo for a black man in America is jail by the age of 20 and if you're from a bad neighborhood dead by 25. There is a way around both jail and death. If we were to separate ourselves from what the media says about us and stop saying we want to be like Mike and trying being more like Colin Powell or Barack Obama and letting sports take the backseat to education. In Douglass' essay he tells the story about when his master, Mr. Auld found out Mrs. Auld was teaching Douglas how to read. His master said "if you teach a nigger to
read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would be unmanageable, and of no. value to his master."(p.137) As soon as Douglass heard his master say that it was if a light bulb went off in Douglass' head. You can see that Mr. Auld knew that by teaching a slave you are telling them that they are just as good as you. Also note that Mr. Auld said that the slave would be of no value to the master but by learning to read Douglass' life gained a lot more value.

Unlike Douglass, when I came into contact with learning it was not love at first sight. Reading was never really important or necessary for me in my early years of school. I was blessed with what I called my charm, just flash my smile and teachers would let me slide by. As I was entering the sixth grade my family decided to switch my school district thus my change from an urban school district to a suburban school district. Along with this change of districts came an assessment to make sure I was up to speed with my peers. The result of the assessment said I was below the reading level of my grade. I was put into a remedial class to help improve my reading. To say the least I was ashamed and disappointed to be in the class, for the first week I showed up and did not do any work. This was not going to fly, so my teacher called home and spoke with my Aunt Sam. Sam pulled me aside one afternoon and told me that if I just started to read a little more each day my reading would slowly but surely improve, Sam also told me that the teacher said that at the end of the semester she would let me take the assessment again and if my test score was better than the last next time around she would pass me out of the class. So for the rest of that semester I was always reading, my plan was to get through the class but I not knowingly started to fall in love with reading. I loved all the places books could take me and all the things a person could do inside of a book. the end of the semester came fast and the assessment went very well I passed out of the class, but my reading did not stop there My Aunt continued to challenge me by asking me to read books and recommend the books that I felt were the best to her. I accepted her challenge and my love for reading continued to grow. I could have easily stayed stuck in my ways and just blow off the class but where would have got me? Although Douglass and I paths were different our ending place was the same, a place filled with opportunity and new life but without education you can't reach this glorious place.

I understand what it feels like to be a black man not conforming to the images. I also know the road will be hard and few will travel it, but in times of weakness we can look to those like Douglass who was willingly to risk his life to learn how to read and see that education really can take you places. Who would have thought a slave would become great friends with Abraham Lincoln. You never know what you can do until you try it, even if others say school is not for them, it does not mean school is not for you. You will never know unless you put down that gun and pick up a book or say no to that kickball game and do your homework. I challenge others to follow in my steps and I you dare to step out of the darkness; I dare you not to be another statistic!
I believe that school is truly a sanctuary. In the essay “School is a Sanctuary,” by Lynda Barry, she talked about how school was her safe haven, because she felt love from many people there including her teacher Ms. LeSane. She thrived on this love because it was lacking at her home and from her parents; the same applied for me as well. I loved school and it also grew to be my second home. To get away from an undesirable home life, some kids become socially involved like in the case of Barry and I; others do not utilize their opportunities to let school become an outlet. Some schools do not think these options should even be necessary and are cutting back on them. If students do not take advantage of extracurricular activities to possibly help them with home or other outside issues, school funds will be cut. That will lead to the student feeling lost and possibly without support from anyone or anywhere else.

Lynda Barry and I both did not have the most constructive home life. When Barry was growing up, her parents would fight all night over money. Barry would also have to worry about relatives moving in and out of the house. This led to her not being noticed very often, and that the only interaction she got was from the television late at night. Barry would also go on to say that she would go to school sometimes when she was sensing that she was invisible (191). There she would see her teacher, Ms. LeSane, and feel special by painting her a pretty picture. I can relate to the feeling. When I was in middle and high school, I would not like to be at home because my father and stepmother were abusive. I would hope for the feeling of invisibility, the only place I felt left alone was at school. I did have a lot of friends and was very social but my mind was left alone, the part that did not want to think about home or the people in it. If I was not in school, my friends would know something was wrong. School was where Barry and I could be safe and have our loving friends and teachers around to make us feel better.

There are children that just have a sensation of relief once they get to school, and all their cares just go away for those seven plus hours. Barry goes on to say, “All I knew was a feeling of panic, like the panic that strikes kids when they realize they are lost. That feeling eased the moment I turned the corner and saw the dark outline of my school at the top of the hill” (192). Barry felt lost without school. At school she felt she had a place to belong and not have to fight for anyone’s attention. I came to have the same eased feeling in my stomach once my feet had meet the colossal, black metal, doorway that lead me down the hallways of my school. For me it felt like I was almost in a hypnotic state in school. You really do not think about anything else besides what is going on in that building. Sometimes you have adults such as teachers that are around to help you out.

Barry went on to praise her teacher Ms. LeSane for being the silent mother she wanted. When Barry talks about how she went to school early, to her sanctuary, and how she felt so comfortable with her teacher she ran up to her and cried in her arms. Barry also says that those were tears of relief, and that:

“I was with my teacher and in a while I was going to sit at my desk, with my crayons and pencils and books and classmates all around me, and for the next six hours I was going to enjoy a thoroughly secure, warm and stable world. It was a world I absolutely relied on. Without it, I don’t know where I would have gone that morning (192)”.

She relied on her teacher and her school to be there and to pick her up every morning. To be concerned and make her feel special as she says a “secure” place that she just felt cared for. I would feel the same way when I went into the class that I would mentor the students in high school. My teacher, Mrs. Bryan, the other mentors and even some students were part of my support group. I remember that sometimes I would go in there early or stay later, just to talk. There I felt like I was special for having simple thoughts and ideas. Or If I was having a bad day I could go in there and feel safe. One day everything was just going downhill for me. I had stayed after class with one of the other mentors and just cried and vented all of what I was feeling. All the other mentor did was come up to me and just hug me. He didn’t say anything but I stopped crying. I had that feeling that it was all going to be ok and that someone loved me enough to just show me that they cared. I could walk into that classroom and they would not judge or even force what was wrong out of me. I came to rely on the support of them. Unfortunately, some students do not even get involved with their teachers so they turn to extracurricular activities.

Extracurricular activities can be an outlet to some students who might have been too timid to turn to a teacher for help. It also helps give you the knowledge to not get stuck in a rut for the rest of your life (Barry 193). Barry did not only have her teacher, but the arts too, as she says, “drawing came to mean everything to me” (Barry 193). Barry writes about how her teacher Ms. LeSane would go up to each student in her class periodically and have them paint a picture on the easel just to feel special, “She believed in the natural healing
power of painting and drawing for troubled children... We all had a chance at it-to sit apart from the class for a while to paint...Drawing came to mean everything to me...I learned to build my life preserver that I could carry into my home” (Barry 193). With this outlet, Barry was able to feel safe at school and now take that same comforting feeling home with her, the love of art. Also that her art would be there for her if no one else was and that she always had that intangible lifeline. For me, it was poetry. Almost like a coded diary where I could spill my soul onto the blank pages and not worry about anyone deciphering my secret message because I was always the happy child with the hard exterior that never let anything on the inside show. I was a part of the poetry club and it also taught me how to not only express myself better but how to use that as a coping mechanism as well. Some students have these opportunities but just blow them off, acting like they don’t need anybody and that they can handle themselves all on their own. This is why all the funds are being cut from the extracurricular activities because of kids that are too proud to accept any help. This leads to funds being cut for the ones who need it the most. Which inconsequently leads to little money to teachers and the extracurricular activities are cut when money is short (193). If these activities were cut then would Barry be the person that she is today? I loved being a Freshman Mentor. Some of the kids would come to me with issues and the other mentors and I would help them build skills to not just be a successful student but a successful adult too. Sometimes they would be having the same issues and we would work them out together. I would on occasion rely on those conversations more than the kids would. They would also keep me grounded, not letting me get too down on myself and to realize I don’t have it so bad sometimes. All I needed to do was keep my chin up and look out for the best. Periodically some of the activities that bring togetherness would cost money. I have no idea what some of these precious students would do if they did not have someone to fall back on. Lynda Barry is writing my and many other kids’ anthem in “School is a Sanctuary” or if it is not your anthem how it should be, about how students should take advantage of activities with school and get help from teachers even if you “think” they do not need them. You can never have too many support systems. Anybody could use another place to call home. Nobody gets alone with whom they live with a hundred percent of the time. At school, you might even make good friends and maybe even have a fun time. You should not only take advantage of these privileges to better yourself, but to keep it thriving for the next generation. Some of you, I suppose, will have kids. What if because of your actions they might not have the same opportunities offered to them? Also just because you are one person does not mean that you cannot make your voice heard or get into activities and have others join in.
The Evolution of a Writer and a New Beginning for a Reader

Hope Edwards

Not everyone has always loved reading and writing or even knows why they are so good or bad at it. In the article by Richard Rodriguez, “The Lonely Good Company of Books”, Rodriguez didn’t always enjoy reading and most of the reason was because his parents considered a chore. He ended up hating reading and was forced to take a remedial reading class. Rodriguez then had to read an abundance of books, for school that he thought he understood. Once he was able to read at home, without being forced, he did a lot better. It was almost the same thing that happened to me. I had a mother that would read to me but I ended up in a remedial reading class. But both of us found out soon enough that you don’t have to read “intelligent” books and tell what they’re about to be considered smart.

Unlike Rodriguez I grew up in a house with a lot of books to pass around. My mother would not only read to us at bed time but sometimes throughout the day just because she liked to impersonate the people in the books. She would set in front of me and do the scary voice for the witch in Hansel and Gretel. Or if I did not know one of the words in the story I would have to the enormous cedar book shelf grab out the old oversized crimson red dictionary and look it up. Sometimes if I was bored I would grab one of the children’s encyclopedias’ of the shelf and just learn about dogs or spaceships and think that it was so neat. My mom was also an avid book lover. If the house was quite it was probably because everyone was setting down reading a book.

Rodriguez had pretty much the complete opposite experience with childhood reading than I did. “For both of my parents, however, read was something done out if necessity and as quickly as possible...Nor did I see them read for pleasure (Rodriguez 232)." This is why from an early age is was put in Rodriguez’s head that reading was never something done to pass the time or to put yourself in a different world for a little bit. So this means that he never had anyone to read him a bedtime story, or a mother to make silly voices for him in a book. Even though Rodriguez’s and mine reading experiences differed when we were children we both wound up in remedial reading classes.

When Rodriguez was in remedial reading class it made him a better reader and want to do more of it. For me it made me hate it and want nothing more to do with it. I began taking reading classes when I was in the second grade. I remember caring my oversized book in an oversized plastic baggy so if it rained it would not get damaged. At first I thought I was just a kid that was pulled away from the class because there was something so special about me that the teacher wanted to hear me read. It was not until the fifth grade when I noticed. I hated being in those classes. I remember sitting around the oval table with four others reading Charlotte’s Web. I thought the only reason that I was in the reading class was because I hated tests and me being in the remedial class must reflect that. Rodriguez’s says that he enjoyed his remedial reading class, “Everything about our session pleased me: the smallness of the room; the noise of the janitor’s broom hitting the edge of the long hallway outside the door; the green of the sun, lighting the wall; and the old woman’s face blurred whit with a beard (Rodriguez 233)” He really enjoyed everything about reading then. The remedial reading class made him interested in reading and ended up leading him to want to do more of it. Both Rodriguez and I had a reading program where we had to read a certain number of books.

I had the reading circle and Rodriguez had his elaborate reading program. The reading circle is a program in elementary schools where you have to read so many fiction and nonfiction books. If you did the required amount you got a little certificate and a coupon for a pizza. I would always be really excited to try to get it until my sixth grade year. I did not like my selection of nonfiction books at my school library. I just randomly picked up a nonfiction book and read it. It was an old raggedy cloth book, and in a faded black it read Mozart. I ended up loving the book. So I went on to read books about Bach and Beethoven. This lead me to fall in love with classical music and reading books again. I ended up joining band and the time I was a very antisocial child. Reading this book brought me out of my nudged me out if my shell and lead me to a better path for my life. Rodriguez became in love with reading and decided to test himself by asking teachers to title of books that were “important”. Rodriguez says, “I ignored their suggestions of anything I suspected was written for children...Each time I finished a book, I reported the achievement to a teacher and basked in the praise my effort earned.” Rodriguez thought he had to challenge himself because he had to prove to himself that he could read these books now. Although some people can read all these adult books that doesn’t mean that they necessarily comprehend them.

A lot of people relate being smart to able to read books with a deep meaning such as, Moby Dick but not really having to understand them. When I entered middle school I was determined to raise my reading level. I would go into my small library and pick out a book a level higher each time. I
associated having a lower reading level with being stupid. I remember being embarrassed to check out books because on the bind of the book it said what grade level that you were reading at. Around then the Harry Potter series came out and I fell in love. I ended up raising my reading level because I just liked the books and wanted to read them so it made them easier to comprehend. Just because you can read a book doesn’t mean that you truly understand what is going on in it. Rodriguez would read many elaborate books and right down just what the theme of the story was. Rodriguez understood the books he read for fun better than the ones he read to prove something of himself. He believed books that were fun to read were not important at all and that anything less than one hundred pages was not really a book. Just like middle school Rodriguez read a list of books that were way above him in high school. He says that, “I needed to keep looking at the book jacket comments to remind myself what the text was about.” Just too once again prove to hi myself that he could read these books and maybe find a way out and to be more educated. I believe that everyone at one point in time comes across a piece of literature and finds themselves dumbfounded because they have no idea what they just read.

The size or the enjoyment of the book should not measure its importance like Richard Rodriguez soon found out, in “The lonely Good Company of Books”. Just because you can ramble out a summary or the theme of a book does not mean that you truly understand it. You need to be able to understand and critically evaluate what the author is saying. A lot of people could pick up a book and say, “On page twenty three the author talks about how he struggled with reading”. But that doesn’t mean that they could tell you what caused it and what that meant to the author. Both Rodriguez and I realized this and strived to become better reader so we didn’t have to struggle with our educations as much. I still have issues with comprehension but that doesn’t hold me back from reading a book I like no matter how big or small it might be.

I have never been an avid reader; unfortunately, that might explain why my high school transcripts look the way they do. Reading was never a priority to me; I always had something better to do than read, or at least I thought I did. Unlike Eudora Welty in “One Writer’s Beginnings” I was never read to as a child or least I can’t remember anyone reading to me. I wish I could go back in time find myself and shove a book right down my throat, but I thought I knew it all. What was some book going to tell me? My father liked to read, and I remember him taking us to the library so he could look for books. I would just walk around flipping through pages, and I would occasionally check out a book just to throw it in the corner as soon as I got home. Now that I’ve just turned thirty, I realized how much I hurt myself by not taking reading or writing serious. I feel jealous when I’m around people who are better readers or writers than me because I know how much harder I could have worked growing up. In truth, I’m just mad at myself, for selling myself short of what my life could have been. Like Rick Bragg in All Over but the Shoutin and Ron Cassie in “Catching Up, With a Little Help” I am facing the fear of going back to school later in life. It took me a while to realize that reading is the backbone to a good education. It helps you become a better speaker, writer, and gives you all around more confidence when it comes to education.

I was unlike Welty who mentions “I learned from the age of two or three that any room, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to” (182). I didn’t have a room to just read in or throw my books out and study. The only room I knew for most of my childhood I shared with my older brother. I don’t remember us doing much reading in it unless it was directions to a Nintendo game. After slacking away most of my high school years, it was time to go to college. Later I found out that loafing around for four years of high school had not really prepared me for college. I dropped out.

Then I was a college dropout with a student loan to pay off and no idea of what I wanted out of life. I might have been a high school graduate, but I was still just a kid. For the next ten years I would be paying for the mistakes I had made as a teenager. Like Ron Cassie in “Catching Up, With a Little Help,” “I found myself missing the foundation of a genuine
I wasn’t qualified to do anything but manual labor, so that’s what I did for a decade and still do till this day. If you were to ask me why I decided to come back to college to get my education, I could tell you about two situations where it just hit me, and both steered me towards the goal I’m working on today.

I have loved sports all my life and enjoyed the relationships sports helps you build; most of my friends to this day I either played high school sports with or against. So when the day comes you can’t really play as much as you would like, you try and find different avenues to stay close to the game. My choice was to start coaching youth sports. I have been coaching basketball for about five years and baseball for two, and I enjoy it very much. I’m not sure if it’s because I’m pushing 6’4 or what it is, but kids just seem to look at me like I’m a giant and have always gotten along with me great. After coaching for the first couple of years and with the relationships I had built with the kids and parents, I thought to myself “I have to find a way to get paid for this”. That got the wheels turning and things set in motion, but I doubted myself. Could I go back to school? It was like Cassie said “What I remember most about high school is eating lunch twice a day and napping”. (24) Is that the student that would return or had I changed? Had the years of working in factories or summers on the roof made me a better student? I started paying off my student loan so I could find out.

The next move I made, thinking that I wanted to work with kids, was to try to get a job where kids were going to be. I put my application in with St. Joseph School District not as a teacher, of course, but in the maintenance department, anyway I could get my foot in the door. A few application attempts and interviews later, I finally got a job. It didn’t pay like some of the factories I had worked in before, but it was a job and fit perfectly with what I thought I was going to do. I didn’t have a choice of what school I wanted to work in, so my boss threw me into Lafayette High School, a place when I was growing up was the worst place you could go or so I thought. I had never been past the gym at Lafayette, and to be honest, I had it beat into me as child you didn’t want to either. I started on my work on my 27th birthday. At first I was ashamed of sweeping the floors and dumping trash. I had done these things at other jobs but never imagined myself doing it at a high school. One thing that got me through the first few months was a friend I knew from elementary school, actually the gym teacher. Talking to him everyday about his job and the rewarding relationships he had built made me want to go back to school even more. As the weeks went by and then months, I continued to pay down my previous school debt and was still undecided and unconfident about going back to school. One day I was doing my usual routine going through the classrooms dumping trash I had a come to Jesus meeting with myself. I sat down, looked around at the walls filled with papers the teachers had graded, and told myself that could have been my paper if I had just tried. That was it. I made my last payment on my student loan and filled out the application to go back. It was done. I had put the wheels in motion, was man enough to push aside the lack of confidence and give college another try? I was scared, like Rick Bragg in All Over but the Shoutin’; I didn’t want anybody to tell me “You embarrass yourself” (223). I thought if I can just get through the first few classes I’ll be alright. The first day of class I was a nervous wreck sweating, anxious, stomach ache, all at the same time. I forgot how young I was the first time I had attended college but soon realized I wasn’t the only person in my late twenties there. I sat next to a woman who was seventy-six in my psychology class. After that, I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

My reading skills have improved over time. I don’t just skim things like I was famous for in my youth. As for my writing skills; I would call my writing process just that, a process. I might end up with five rough drafts; I know I can always change them; it’s great. I like to sit down at the computer and in one session type out my story or essay knowing that it’s just the beginning of what my paper will look like at the end. Ten years ago I would have just handed in my first rough draft and been done with it. As I got older my study skills somehow have improved; instead of me putting things off until the last moment I jump right on assignments, so I don’t have that lingering thought of “damn, I have a paper due tomorrow and I haven’t even started it yet.” That never happens to me. I go to school during the days and work at the night. The great thing about working at a high school is there is never a shortage of places to study or tutors to ask for help if I need it. I’m finishing up my third semester of college. I’m not sure how I’ve improved as a reader and a student. I think I might be something like a fine wine; I just get better with age.
Alcohol has been a controversial issue in this country for decades and when abused can lead to depression, addiction, and even death. I have witnessed the destruction of good men due to alcohol. People react differently to alcohol; some people use it responsibly, and some people are prone to the addiction side of it and become alcoholics. In Rick Bragg’s book All Over but the Shoutin, Bragg shows how he went through a rough childhood due to the abuse of alcohol by his father and later on his brother. Like Bragg, I haven’t had a problem with drinking but have been a witness to all the horrors alcohol brings to the table. Alcohol can take everything away from you: money, family, freedom, or even your life, all for just one more drink.

Like many other people, Bragg was thrust into an alcoholic home when living with his father. Witnessing domestic abuse and violence, he stated, “I remember how the man’s yellow sport shirt had blood on it, how his pocket change spilled out into the gravel, and how the man’s children stood and watched, in terror” (7). That’s Bragg’s recalling his father beating up a man in front of him at the age of six. It’s hard to imagine that kind of scene when you’re six, but that’s what alcohol does, blurs your vision and judgment. Most people live a comfortable life not worrying if your father is going to beat someone up in a parking lot.

Abuse is what Bragg’s father was good at, beating his wife in front of the children. Bragg explained, “My momma did not run, did not hide. She stood there like a statue. Then slowly she took off her glasses. Don’t hurt my teeth she told him” (63). Bragg was lucky though, his father never physically abused him. He stated “I distinctly remember that I was not afraid, because no matter how much red hatred clouded his eyes, how much Jim Beam or beer or homemade whiskey assaulted his brain, he never touched me” (7). Instead, Bragg’s mother took the beatings saving the children. Bragg’s father had gone to war and come back to a war within himself never winning until death.

Bragg and his brothers might not have been beaten by their father, but when he left them to go out and get drunk he might as well have. After all the beatings, his mother got abandoned. As Bragg explains, “A few days later he left us, with no money, no car, nothing. I remember my momma sitting at the table, crying. At the time I thought it was because she missed him, but now I know that had nothing to do with it” (64). It’s hard to imagine this scene, but it’s everyday life for families dealing with alcoholism. Eventually alcohol took his father’s life way before his time as Bragg asserts, “But it was the drinking that killed him, really just as sure as if he slipped and fell and cut his throat on the broken bottle” (7). Even as he was on his deathbed, he was still a slave to the drink.

Like Bragg, I have been dealing with alcohol problems in my family before I was even born. My mother’s father committed suicide about a month or two before I was born dealing with the problems of mounting debt and alcohol problems. It became too much for him to handle, and he shot himself. I wish I could have met him. My brother is whole different story; it’s funny because he’s just like Bragg’s older brother Sam, hard working never missing a day of work, but one day he made a tragic mistake. After fishing and drinking for hours, my brother and two of his friends decided to go get more beer. This was not the best idea. My brother lost control of his car flipping over about eight times and ejecting the passenger and crushing him as the car continued to roll. After a long recovery and a lengthy trial, my brother was sentenced to prison for involuntary manslaughter and ten years on parole after his release. You would think that would have wised him up, but like Bragg’s father, after the accident, he now has demons that follow him. It’s just like Bragg explains, “When they descended shrieking on him the only place to hide was in the bottom of a bottle. But instead of freeing him it only fed them” (63). The only freedom some alcoholics find is in more drinking. Recently, my brother checked himself into rehab to clean up and try and get his head back on straight; it’s going to be a battle for the rest of his life.

As I look back at my family history, I feel blessed that I’ve never gotten out of control with alcohol. Maybe at a couple of parties when I was younger, but I think the tragedy that my brother went through as well as sitting in a courtroom filled with tears kept me sober. Just knowing something had to be done; punishment was imminent, it showed me that in a one lapse of judgment when under the influence, not just yours but many people’s lives, can change forever. It never hits home until you’re involved. I remember the judge reading his sentence telling us, “You’ll have many more holidays to spend with your family, but you ended this family’s holidays forever.” I had never thought of it like that. I was only seventeen just trying to grasp the situation and wondering what was going to happen to my nephews, only to find out that my nephews would be moving in with me, not only into my house but my bedroom.

Alcohol is such a simple thing to abuse. It’s at every corner gas station and on television like it’s the greatest thing on the planet. Advertisers make it seem like with a couple of
beers you can have any girl you want and climb to the top of any mountain. I would love to make a real life commercial starting out with a woman with a black eye and two kids crying. I don’t think people would buy my brand. I know when I finally settle down and start a family, I’ll be sure to have my brother talk to my kid’s about the struggles and demons that come along with alcohol abuse. In Bragg’s book he describes the physical abuse his mother took because of alcohol. Bragg witnessed horrors that I could only imagine, but the substance abuse I can totally relate to. I never saw anyone get beat up, just beating themselves.

In Kansas City there is a special place where the big boys play. It’s a place where fathers and sons come together to share what some people call America’s pastime. It’s a place where thirty-thousand people gather and think one thing: “This might be the year.” For me it’s a place where time stops for a few hours, where nothing matters but the game. It’s a place where children dream of being on the field alongside their heroes. It’s also a place to see teamwork at its best. My father has been taking me to Kauffman Stadium for as long as I can remember; it’s been a place where we’re equals, no more talking of life, just baseball.

The night before we head down I’m already getting prepared packing the cooler, grill, extra clothes because in early April it’s still pretty chilly. Then it’s a short drive down I-29 to I-70 east, and we’re there. As we pull up onto Stadium Boulevard we can see the parking lot, and on opening day it looks like a sea of blue and white. You wouldn’t think the parking lot would not be an experience, but trust me, it is. As I open the car door, the smell of barbeque grills almost knocks us back into the car. In Kansas City it’s a tradition to tailgate, like playing basketball in Indiana. I always like to throw on some bratwurst and polish sausage, just to start the day off right. I like seeing kids throwing the football around, and people playing washers; it’s like a big picnic, all put together by the Royals. After a few hours of talking baseball, grabbing food off the grill, drinking a cold beverage of your choice, it’s time to grab your ticket and head into the stadium.

On opening day the Royals always give out a promotional gift; usually the first game it’s a full schedule fridge magnet. I know it’s not much, but with 162 games, it’s nice to just look at the fridge to find out when and where they play the rest of the season. Before we sit down, we always walk around the stadium. I love to walk in and look at the grass; it’s the greenest I’ve ever seen and is always mowed into a cool pattern. Sometimes it’s diamonds, other times it’s a checkerboard patterned. This year the stadium had renovations, and for the first time you could walk completely around the ballpark. It gives you views never before seen by a fan, except for a few camera guys that post up out by the scoreboard. Crown vision is the new digital scoreboard in
center field; it’s really breathtaking and if not careful, you’ll find yourself missing the game because of all there is to watch on it. It has more information about players, batting averages, pitch speed, earned run averages, everything you need to know and some things you didn’t. In right field is Rivals sports bar. You can order food and watch the game from the comfort of an indoor environment if you want. On top of Rivals is the Bud Light party deck where you can also watch the game and relax with a few buddies and have a good time. It’s a nice addition to the stadium.

In left field the Royals added a new hall of fame, and they give tours through it every fifteen minutes. It even goes back to Kansas City’s Negro league team the Kansas City Monarchs and the legendary Buck O’Neil, who has since passed away. The Royals have dedicated a seat behind home plate called the Buck O’Neil legacy seat, which they give away every game to someone who has touched lives and given inspiration throughout the community. I think the biggest improvement to the stadium is the wider concourses; last year you would walk shoulder to shoulder trying to get to a food vendor or restroom. Now they have doubled the bathrooms to cut down on the lines and added twice as many food vendors as well. It’s also nice that they’ve installed plenty of flat screen televisions throughout the concourse, so when you have to leave your seat you don’t miss a pitch.

Before the first pitch and the announcer is going over the starting lineups, I always have to visit my favorite vendor in the whole place, Gates Barbeque. It doesn’t matter how much I might have eaten in the parking lot; I still have to get some. With the starting lineups announced, it’s time for the National Anthem and on opening day, they usually bring somebody well known like American Idol’s David Cook, a local celebrity. Last year after the anthem they had four fighter planes fly over; it gave me chills and sense of pride. After that I’m ready to run out on the field, but instead I just watch it with my Dad. I sometimes wonder if the players really know how blessed and lucky they are, to play a game they love and to make a living at it.

Kauffman stadium has been a place where the men in my family have come together for years. I have a lot of memories there. One time I caught a foul ball in the upper deck hanging right by the rail; everybody cheered when I caught it. I think it’s the closest I’ve been to being a major leaguer. Another time we took my Grandpa to the game, and we all took a picture together, and he was so short standing next to me; I don’t know where I got my height from. I’ve been there with my two nephews that can’t sit still long enough to even care about the game; they just like to people watch. I’ve even taken my friend and his kids down because the kids were going into middle school and had never been to a game before. I hope I started a tradition in their family now. The stadium and the team have been therapeutic for my father and me. When we can’t see eye to eye, we have baseball. When we don’t have anything to talk about, there is always the Royals, twelve months a year. That’s the first thing out of our mouths “Boy those Royals are playing good,” and the next thing you know we’re off to a game. I’m sure there are a lot of people with similar stories of bonding and friendship all brought on by the stadium.

Kauffman stadium has brought my father and me together for years now; I feel like I owe them something. It’s been more than a ballpark to me. It’s a living thing that I love to visit full of life and action. More importantly it’s the home of the Kansas City Royals.
Every little girl has a dream about her life changing moment. Maybe it’s about a prince or getting a pony. For mine, it was neither of those. The only things I had were a father who didn’t care and a mother who couldn’t take care of me, which taught me many things about life. While dealing with my mom’s illness I learned how to be an adult at the age of seven and how to take care of others.

For a couple of months my mom wasn’t feeling good. She would wake up in the mornings and different parts of her body were numb. Thinking she had only pulled a muscle playing Frisbee at my 5th birthday party in April, she went to a chiropractor. He told her that it was not a pulled muscle and that she needed to make an appointment with a neurologist. In June of 1996 my mother was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (M.S.).

I knew at some point in my life my mother would be helpless. I never expected it would happen when we were both so young. I watched her go from a walking cane, to a walker, then to a wheelchair. My mom was the strongest person I have ever known. She was fighting her illness while holding her position as manager at Pier One Imports. My dad didn’t seem to be that bad of a guy to me. Then again I was only five. He would leave my brother and I home alone while my mom was at work so he could go out and drink with his friends. Then he quit coming around. Eventually he found a new place. He didn’t have a job of his own and soon after my mom was put in the wheelchair, she had to quit her job. The only income we had was what the government gave us. This was not much. My parents were still legally married. My mom wanted a divorce, but he didn’t want to because he was scared because I didn’t want to do anything wrong and hurt her. She reassured me and I took it out. She told me she was very proud of me. She had caregivers to do all those things for her but half of the time they wouldn’t show up. I hated that sometimes I couldn’t go out and play with my friends because they wouldn’t come to work and I had to take care of my mom.

In 1998 my mom received the award of M.S. Mother of the year. We had a paid vacation to go to Washington, D.C., and we stayed in a very expensive hotel called The Mayflower. Although the hotel was nice, the food was not that great. While staying in Washington we got to go to the Whitehouse and meet Bill Clinton who was, at the time, President of the United States. We went over Christmas vacation so we were able to see the decorated Christmas tree. My mom, brother, and I each made something for Clinton. My mom had me help her make a tree ornament which still hangs on the tree each year. I drew him a picture of my mom, brother, and I. I also added our dog Bailey. She was my mom’s best friend. Bailey followed my mom everywhere and refused to leave her side.

I learned to be careful what you wish for on March 1st, 2004. That morning I woke up at 6 a.m. I had a social studies test that day and didn’t want to go to school. My brother had stayed the night at my grandma’s house that night so it was just me and my mom. I went into her room to tell her I didn’t feel good and didn’t want to go to school. I turned on the lights and said “Mom?” She didn’t answer. I walked up to the edge of the bed and saw that there was vomit everywhere. I thought maybe she was just sleeping really heavily so I shook her body still, nothing. I was only 11 years old and didn’t know what to do. I called my grandma and told her what was going on and that my mom wouldn’t wake up. She had told me to call 911. So I did. The guy on the phone asked if her skin was cold. My answer was yes.

I remembered the first time I took out her IV though. We were sitting in our small living room with my mom. It was the day that she was supposed to have her IV taken out. There wasn’t a caregiver there that day so my mom asked me to take it out. She told me how to do it and I was scared because I didn’t want to do anything wrong and hurt her. I took it out. She reassured me and I took it out. She told me she was very proud of me. She had caregivers to do all those things for her but half of the time they wouldn’t show up. I hated that sometimes I couldn’t go out and play with my friends because they wouldn’t come to work and I had to take care of my mom.

I did my own laundry, cooked my own food, and took care of myself as well as my mom. I learned how to give her the medication she was prescribed, gave her shots, fed her through her feeding tube, and even learned to take out her IV. I spoke with my Grandma Colleen the other day and she shared with me a story that she remembered. She said, “Natalie, I remember one time when I was over at your house and you were just about to feed your mom through her feeding tube and you said “Here grandma, you do it have to get her something. But don’t make her laugh because it will all shoot back out!” I laughed when I heard this. I don’t remember a lot of the things my family tells me about my mom and I. I do remember the first time I took out her IV because they wouldn’t come to work and I had to take care of my mom.

In 1997 my dad quit paying the rent for our house and we had to move. We ended up moving to Doniphan, NE because it was closer to my Grandma Jeanie and easier for her so she could help take care of my mom. I was starting second grade not knowing anyone and only having half of a family. Then in 1998 my parents got divorced. I guess I didn’t really notice when my dad didn’t follow us to Doniphan. He slowly removed himself from my life before I was too old to realize what was going on. I had the knowledge that no 7 year old should have.
An ambulance was sent to my house and soon after the paramedics showed up my grandma got to my house followed by my brother. She told us to go sit in my room and wait. A few minutes later she came in the room and told us the news we already knew but didn’t want to hear. She had passed away through the night. There were so many things running through my head but one that stuck out the most. The night before my mom and I had gotten into a fight and I said things that I didn’t mean and shouldn’t have said.

The day that my mother died all of my family showed up at my house. There were aunts, brothers, uncles, grandparents, friends of my moms and friends of my brother’s. My Aunt Kim and Aunt Kathy told me one day that they remember it very well. They told me that I was acting as if nothing happened and I made them watch Pirates of the Caribbean over and over again. The week of my mother’s death and her funeral I couldn’t stand being at home. I didn’t want to deal with any of it, so I ended up going to school for a day. That was a mistake. Everyone was really nice to me and kept asking if I was okay, but that made me think of it more. My teachers told me I didn’t need to make up the work for the week I was out. It didn’t really hit me until the night of the visitation. We had an open casket and I hadn’t gone up to see her yet. After a while I thought that I couldn’t put it off any longer. So I walked the long walk up the aisle to her casket. When I finally got there it looked nothing like her. I just stared. That’s when it hit me. She was really gone and I wouldn’t be able to tell her I was sorry for the things I had said. I started crying and when I turned around my best friends mom was there waiting with open arms. I don’t remember the day of the funeral. It was all a blur. I remember them playing “Brown Eyed Girl” by Van Morrisson. That was her favorite song, and hearing it now makes me cry. I also remember that my dad didn’t show up. I was so mad at him and didn’t understand how he couldn’t be there.

I never really had any motivation for school. When I was younger I didn’t try and didn’t do my homework. My mom was always on me about that. After she passed away I started doing my work as best as I could. I never missed a day of school unless I was really sick. I used to skip school just because I was tired or didn’t feel like going. I would sometimes say I was sick and call my Grandma Colleen who lived about a half hour away and ask her to bring me food since I was “too sick” to make something for myself. I used to take checks from my mom’s check book and forge her signature. I didn’t know the consequences at that age. After a couple months they finally found out and I got in a lot of trouble. A year ago at Christmas my second cousin gave me a car since my grandma couldn’t afford to buy one for me and as soon as I got back into town I went job hunting so I could have money for gas. I felt like I needed to since my grandma shouldn’t have to support me. I got my first job at KFC and started out at minimum wage. Soon after that I was making more than some of the managers. I never called in or came in late. I paid for my own gas, clothes, toiletries and any other things that I wanted. I like being able to have my own money so my grandma can have her own money for the things she wants instead of having to pay for everything for me.

My life has been nowhere near easy. If those things wouldn’t have happened I wouldn’t have learned how to take care of myself and probably still wouldn’t know how. I would be just like all of the other young college students and take everything and everyone for granted. I wouldn’t appreciate the little things in life or the people I have met along the way. Most importantly I wouldn’t be the person I am today. My mom made a big impact on my life. In your eyes she may have just been the Mother of the Year. To me, she was more.
Reading is a very essential part of life. Everyone needs to know how to do this. Reading lets you enter many unknown worlds; they make all of your dreams come true. Whether or not you read constantly, you need to understand that you cannot live your life without it. In the essay “One Writers Beginnings” by Eudora Welty, she explains to us how letters formed her words which she used to write her books. Reading and Writing can help you discover who you will be. Welty, and myself have decided to let the magic of words carry us through the many journeys of life.

As children, most of us were read to, whether it was a bedtime story or any other part of the day. My childhood experiences are very similar to Welty’s. For her, it was her mother who made reading a very important part in her life. For me, it was my grandmother. In Welty’s essay she discusses with us her childhood memories:

She’d read to me in the big bedroom in the mornings, when we were in her rocker together ... in the dining room on winter afternoons ... and at night when I’d got in my own bed ... sometimes she read to me in the kitchen while she sat churning (Welty 182)

She loved the stories her mother read to her. It was her dream to read to her mother one day. Welty’s mother passed on her love of books to her daughter. Similarly, my grandmother is a big fan of books. When I was younger she purchased a book that I like to call The Big Blue Book. It held at least twenty stories, varying from Cinderella to The Velveteen Rabbit. I remember staying the night at her house, putting on my pajamas to crawl into my grandma’s giant bed, and pick out a story to be read to me. This book was my favorite thing at her house. When the book is closed, the edges of the pages are gold b when looking at just one individual page the color is gone. I never understood how that could happen. I always looked forward to the end of the day just for her to read a story to me. She was so animated when she read me those stories. She had a different voice for each of the characters in the stories. Welty and I did not know this at the time but these stories from her mother and my grandma would be the first step to our love of reading.

Not everyone needs to love reading, but for many of us, we need to. Books are there for us to escape into someone else’s life, and to forget about your own problems. Not many people understand the importance of reading, but Welty and I do. Welty said, “I live in gratitude to my parents for initiating me ... it was the keystone to knowledge” (185). Welty realized what most of us don’t; she accepted the fact that reading was a very important part of life. She was lucky enough to have parents who truly cared about her education. They spent money that they didn’t have on books for her to learn. From these books she received from her parents she fell in love with the alphabet. The alphabet formed words that helped her learn. For me, it took a while to understand just how important books were. In 1998, I received my first Harry Potter book from my uncle Scotti for my 9th birthday. From then on it wasn’t me being read to, I had to read to my grandma. The roles were switched and I was constantly reading to her. I read to her before bed and during the long two hour drive from her house to my uncle Scotti’s. Most of the time I would read the whole way there and back, but sometimes I just got bored and quit reading. A lot of the time she would push me to continue the rest of the way there. My grandma and I made a deal, I could see the movie as long as I was finished with the book. It was like that with any book that had a movie out. I had to read it first. I am very thankful for that deal because I would not understand how much better the book was. After a while we moved on the Harry Potter to other books that I can’t remember now. Reading out loud to my grandma became step number two, to building my love and trust for reading.

I wasn’t a big fan of reading at first. I still hate reading things that don’t interest me. If it is something I am interested in, I can have it read in a day. Welty and I have yet another thing in common. Welty states, “I located myself in these pages and go straight to the stories and pictures I loved” (184). She read “The Yellow Dwarf” many times because of the colorful pictures. Some of her books have become worn and are falling apart. I agree with this statement because the way I can tell if I’ve read a good book is if I saw it in my mind. When I read it’s like a movie in my head. I can picture the houses, neighborhoods, schools, malls, and every detail about the person. Sometimes if the book was really good I can pick it up months later and still picture everything the same way I had when I first read the book. It may not be the same movie another reader sees, but its mine. That’s the joy of reading; one story can mean a million different things, depending on the reader.

To some people, their books are just like their children. They will hold on to them through everything. Some people only have a few and some people have hundreds. Welty’s father only had a few to show from his childhood, “this was the only book my father as a little boy had had of his own. He had held onto it, and might have gone to sleep with its coverless face” (184). In Welty’s house now they have tons
of books. Her father spent money they did not have to make sure he could share the joy with her that the books brought him. Whether you have five books or five-hundred, they are very important. After a couple of years I now own 132 books. Some are more worn than others and some look brand new. I’m not sure how many books I have actually read between borrowing them from friends or checking them out from libraries. I figure I’ve read somewhere around 200. Reading has become a main part of my day. I usually go through two books a week. I read for at least two hours a day. My brother thinks I’m nuts because I read so much. I’m very hesitant when it comes to letting someone borrow a book of mine. I’m not sure when I decided I liked to read so much. One thing I do know is that I owe it all to my grandma.

Reading is like a hobby to me. It is done without question or any thought at all. I can dive into any kind of book at any time of the day. Welty and I have understood that books will always be there for you whenever you need one. Not everyone can relate to the same books so it is important for you to find a good genre that you can relate to. Words are like a journey. They can take you many different places. You might go to the moon or a whole new universe. Words can teach you something, make you laugh, or comfort you. Reading will get you through school and into a good job. There aren’t many places that a person could work without knowing how to read. Everyone can be a reader; you just need to take the first steps into a good book.

If we had to face life without anything to read, what kind of life could we possibly have? A question I have asked myself many times over the years, but until reading the essays, “One Writer’s Beginnings,” by Eudora Welty, “The Love of Books,” by Gloria Naylor, and “The Lonely, Good Company of Books,” by Richard Rodriquez, I never felt inclined to determine the answer. I cannot remember who actually taught me to read or at what age I started, but I do know without a doubt, my life would not feel as complete as it does if I did not have the ability to read.

With my parents I saw a combination of both reading for pleasure and necessity. Dad, for instance only read when something absolutely required reading and if possible, he would have Mom read it for him. Mom read constantly. When she finished doing housework or taking care of my brothers and me, she had her romance novel in her hands. Mom took her book with her everywhere just in case, she might have a few minutes to read. I remember going on fishing trips, she would cast her line, then sit in her lawn chair and read her book, while waiting for the fish to bite. It seemed that Mom made reading exciting. I would listen to her discuss books with her friends over the telephone, deciding which one to read next or just comparing what they each had garnered from ones they already read.

While searching my early memories of reading I see a black and white checkered trimmed book of Mother Goose nursery rhymes, mostly likely a book read to me by Mom. Then the faded memories of reading the rudimentary beginner books in the first or second grade of Dick, Jane and their dog Spot. Many of my favorite books came to me in the same way that Eudora Welty describes in her essay “One Writers Beginnings.” “I was presented, from as early as I can remember with books of my own, which appeared on my birthday, and Christmas morning’ (184). I always received at least one book on these occasions, and other times throughout the year. These books would start me on the road of learning to read.

Now that I had started my journey along the road of learning I would not let anyone detour me off of it. I wanted to read everything that I came into contact with. My teachers never assigned specific books to read, but they encouraged
reading by having us do book reports. Of course they made it more appealing by always giving us an incentive to read, the person with the most book reports turned in would get rewarded with candy or even a new book sometimes. At the end of the school year if students met all requirements they would receive a reading circle certificate. To help us achieve this goal, my third grade teacher took time everyday to read out aloud to us. She introduced her class to amazing books such as, Charlotte’s Web and The Little House in the Big Woods. In the essay “One Writer’s Beginnings” Eudora Welty emphasizes, “Learning stamps you with its moments. Childhood’s learning is made up of moments. It isn’t steady. It is a pulse” (185). She makes it sound like learning only happens at certain times, but I feel learning happens from the time we wake up in the morning till we go to sleep at night. Our brains constantly take in everything we see, hear or read and store it till the need arises for us to use it. It may take a few days, months, or years to realize that something we read for pleasure or necessity educated us with information that we can now use to help make our lives easier.

During my teen years my life started to overwhelm me with uncertainties, which I did not know how to deal with. I started living with my grandmother, fighting with Mom, and facing puberty. The books I had always perused seemed to become very childish and not satisfying my needs. I started to constantly complain about not having anything to do. One day Mom looked at me and stated, “Well, if you cannot find anything else to do with your time, then read a book.” I had already read every book I owned dozens of times, so I picked up one of her romance novels and began to read. I could not put the book down, so when we had to leave to go get milk and see my grandparents on Dad’s side, I took the book with me. I finally set the book down when Granny asked me to play a game of Scrabble with her. As soon as the game ended, we had to leave and I accidentally left the book there. The following Saturday, Granny met us at the door with the book in her hand. Granny believed Mom should not allow me to read that kind of book. At the time I did not understand her feelings and I could not explain to her why I found the book so interesting. In the essay “The Love of Books,” Gloria Naylor states, “Books were to be my only avenue out of the walls my emotions built around me in those years” (227). This summarizes exactly how I felt about those romance novels and other books. When I would read one of these books, I became the heroine in the novel. Even though in the beginning of the story she faced many unknown dangers, it provided a way for me to get away from my personal troubles and I always knew in the end everything would work out for her. It gave me the will to continue to face my real life problems and have faith that one day I would also have the happiness I deserved. I only wish I could have stated that fact to Granny way back then.

As I aged into adulthood, reading became much more to me than just an act of learning. Books became my friends. In the essay, “The Lonely, Good Company of Books” one particular statement by Richard Rodriguez really articulates my feelings toward books. “I found reading a pleasurable activity. I came to enjoy the lonely, good company of books” (234). While curled up on the couch or snuggled under the warm covers reading my books, I did not have to worry that I could never live up to the expectations of my family. Then I had my own daughter and life gave me one more mountain to climb. Raising a child on a single parent income did not leave much time or money for books. Reading almost vanished completely from my life, except for the nursery rhymes and fairy tales read to Cherlynn. When I did find the time to read, I would submerge myself so deep into the book that nothing could get me to come up for air.

Learning to read completed my life. It gave me the ability to learn to write, to understand what others have gone through and how they felt accomplishing the struggles they faced. Through reading I have gained the knowledge to conquer the obstacles placed in my path and I know that as long as I have the ability no one can keep me down.

Works Cited


Nodaway Island

Cheryl Frizell

Throughout childhood, our family went camping at many different public camping areas across Missouri and Kansas. Each campground held a special meaning, but a place only twenty minutes from home captured my heart. A campground we went to, so we could get away at the last minute or if we could not afford to go to one of the more modern camp areas. Even though it did not have all the commercialized conveniences, Nodaway Island still became a place where I feel safe, happy, and worthy; a big soft security blanket.

Our family spent many fun filled peaceful weekends camping there. Not actually an island, but a conservation area that the public uses to access the river, just north of St. Joseph; in between the blink, and they are gone towns of Amazonia and Nodaway. To find the exact spot, look for a little brown wooden sign with yellow letters pointing to the entrance. Coming down the drive, the beauty in the sparse environment astounded me. It does not look like a place to camp, with no way to plug in a fancy recreational vehicle or any fancy bathhouses. The only building found there, an old pioneer day outhouse. However, a small gully overgrown with trees and weeds, blocks off the house that sits on the other side of it. A cement drive leads into the river for people to use when putting their boats into the water. A small grassy area sits off to one side and, if positioned right, two or three tents will fit. The isolation of Nodaway Island gives it a special allure. It meant that we would not have to worry about a bunch of strangers bothering our weekend of relaxation and fun. We would spend all day out on the river; rod and reel fishing and running trout lines, (a string of hooks tied to the bank and stretched into the river). At night, we would build a small campfire and cook dinner, the catch of the day or the meat we brought for backup. After eating and cleaning up, everyone would just sit around the campfire telling stories about the one that got away, while roasting marshmallows to a nice golden brown. At times, I would sit on one of the rocks lining the edge of the bank. The big river rocks measured at least three to five feet wide. The rocks serve a purpose other than just a place to sit; they prevent people from accidentally driving off the edge into the river. Letting the silence of the night envelope me like a warm cozy blanket, I sat there enjoying the peace, broken only by an occasional train whistle or laughter from the family sitting around the campfire. Mom would eventually say, “Time for bed,” and while lying in the sleeping bag on the cool damp grass listening to the slow rhythmic melody of the flowing river; I had nothing to fear.

When a time of depression darkened my soul, I would jump in my car and start driving anywhere just to get away from the things bothering me. Even though the destination did not matter, it seemed to end at Nodaway Island. My depression stemmed from the changes taking place within the family. My brothers married and had their own children. We still tried to make time to go camping together at least once or twice during the summer, but then Mom got cancer and passed away. It seemed nobody had the time to join in family times anymore. I could not handle the way Dad moped around the house, due to the sadness he had to endure and I moved out. Dad still went up to Nodaway Island to launch his boat, but I no longer took the time to go with him. I also had taken the loss of my mother extremely hard. Upon arriving at my sanctuary, I would get out and sit on one of the big river rocks lining the bank and look out over the peaceful flowing river. The place where our family had spent so many amazing peaceful weekends had transformed into a safe haven. While there, the trials of everyday life did not matter. I could watch the birds flying without a care in the sky, the water rippling around the buoy marking the channel for the barges, and silently talk to my mother. Before I knew it, the happiness from past memories came flowing over me causing, the heaviness of the depression to slip into the calmness of the deep flowing river to float away.

Years came and went, my life changed. It seemed like I never had the time to do what I wanted to do. Overwhelming depression would creep upon me, making me want to go to my safe haven, but the everyday rigors of work and raising my daughter alone encompassed my time. I did not own a vehicle that I could trust to make it to the places I needed to go to, so I gave up on making my trips to Nodaway Island. I finally got a job that gave me the freedom to purchase a decent car, but still it seemed like the time to go never presented itself. While at the gas station one day filling up the car with gas, I ran into a man that I had met earlier in my life. The first time we met, we spent the whole night sitting on the front porch of the house where my daughter and I lived, talking and I had a feeling we might have a chance together. After several months of casual talks, we lost contact. The next day he called and we decided to see each other. We both enjoy just getting in the car and going. Driving and talking a good way to get to know each other without all of the trappings of society. One night after picking him up from work, he noticed that I had something troubling me, so he said, “We have time, let’s take a drive.”
We headed north and instinctively I drove straight to Nodaway Island. Instantly the old magic of this special place surrounded me and I knew we had come to the right place. We sat in the car watching the moonlight glisten on the silently moving water. My little sanctuary had not changed very much. The outhouse now has a flushing toilet, and the boat ramp had received some updating. All tension washed away, I opened up to him, letting everything I had bottled up inside spill out, telling him more about my life, then I had ever allowed anyone to know. The place that means so much to me had let me know that I had finally met a good person and the relationship could last. We still make a couple of trips up to Nodaway Island a month. Missouri no longer allows camping at Nodaway Island, but just going up there to sit and talk, gives us time to reflect on the past, present and future. Just the two of us, sitting there listening to the bullfrogs croaking their songs and the crickets chirping their songs in unison. They seemed to intertwine effortlessly like the unsung songs of our lives coming together as one.

Nodaway Island, a small piece of land that the state of Missouri turned into a public area with access to the river, means nothing to the countless people that use it, but to me it has become so much more. Thanks to the many times I spent there with my family on camping trips, the times I have gone there to meditate and time spent there with my significant other have proven to me that no other place compares to my safe haven. No matter how much time pass, Nodaway Island will always remain the same to me. Time can change the landscape, but it cannot take away the feeling of happiness, security, and worthiness that wraps around me, like big soft security blanket as soon as I pull up to, the big river rock guardrail and put my car in park. The sounds of the rippling water easing all the troubles in my soul away.

Several works that I have recently read compelled me to start thinking about the role of education in our lives. The short essay, “Sanctuary of School,” by Lynda Barry and some passages in Jeannette Walls, The Glass Castle, really motivated the thought progression. In society today, there are many ways for children and adults to feel unwanted in their home environment, so they latch on to the things that make them feel safe and wanted. To many, their educational institution, whether an actual school or a place they choose to learn at, becomes a sanctuary.

In the story, “Sanctuary of School,” by Lynda Barry she describes how school was her safe haven away from the turmoil of her hectic home life. Barry does not say exactly how troubling her home life is, but the reader can get a feeling of what it was like when she remarks, “In a perfect world my absence would not have gone unnoticed. I would have had two parents in a panic to locate me, instead of two parents in a panic to locate an answer to the hard question of survival during a deep financial and emotional crisis” (192). As a small child, she woke up early one morning in a state of panic. She had a feeling that she needed to be somewhere else, so she hurried to dress and snuck out the door. She made her way to school. Upon arriving, she felt the tension and the panic she was feeling lifted, so she sat on the monkey bars waiting for school to start. After, a short time adults started to arrive and she described each one of them, giving a sense of how each one of them made her feel she was out of harm's way. When her teacher finally arrived, she ran to her crying and hugged her. This shocked her teacher, but instead of chastising her, she hugged her back and made her feel special. It took Lynda Barry 28 years to understand why she started crying when her teacher appeared that day. Barry sums it up perfectly when she says, “I was with my teacher, and in a while I was going to sit at my desk, with my crayons and pencils and books and classmates all around me, and for the next six hours I was going to enjoy a thoroughly secure, warm, and stable world. It was a world I absolutely relied on. Without it, I don’t know where I would have gone that morning” (192). Lynda Barry had found her special place and it helped her to embrace the never-ending need to learn.
It is true that people of all ages need to find a place where they feel secure and do not have to worry about the problems they face outside of their sanctuary. Schools are a readily available source of security. As a child, I never felt the need to escape from hardships because my home was always a place where I felt secure. Now that I am an adult, it is easier to grasp the notion of school being a sanctuary. I am beginning to feel that way about college. Because, being unemployed seems to be putting extra weight on my shoulders and it is harder to make ends meet. There are constant feelings that I have failed my family and friends and that there is no one I can truly depend on. The time I spend at school lets me get away from the worries of my shambled home life. While at school there is a small glimmer of hope that I will get a better job after graduating and my home life will get back on an even keel. There are times I wish that I never had to leave the peaceful atmosphere, but when I have no option but to go back home, dread and depression begin to envelope me on the walk to my car. By the time I get home, I am already counting the hours until I can go back to my sanctuary.

In the same respect, Jeannette Walls, author of The Glass Castle did not express, but implied, that education was her way to escape the unorthodox lifestyle of her family. Her family was constantly moving from place to place, never allowing the children a chance for a normal education. At one point in Walls' childhood, the family did settle in one place long enough to allow the children to attend a public school. On their first day of school, it became apparent how much Walls depended on knowledge as an escape. The teacher automatically assumed that she would be lacking in her skills and was shocked when Walls exclaimed that she had read the complete set of Little House on the Prairie, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Upon hearing this, the teacher had her read and decided to put her in the gifted group. It was evident how important this made Walls feel when she stated, "Lori’s and Brian’s teacher also put them in gifted reading groups. Brian hated it, because the other kids were older and he was the littlest guy in the class, but Lori and I were secretly thrilled about it" (95). Later, when Walls was in high school, it became more evident how she had used school as her sanctuary. Walls began working on the school newspaper. Walls states: “Even though the Wave came out only once a month, I worked on it every day. Instead of hiding in the bathroom during lunch hour, I spent it in Miss Bivens classroom, where I wrote my article, edited the stories written by other students, and counted the letters in headlines to make sure they fit the columns. I finally had a good excuse for why I never ate lunch. ‘I’m on a deadline,’ I’d say” (231). This was a way of justifying that schools can help people escape from their unfortunate lifestyle for a few hours. Walls not only had a reason for attending more school functions to get away from home, but she also was given the chance to learn the skills to do a job that would be her salvation from the life that she was forced to live by her parents. Schools may not have been an actual building for Walls, but she made anywhere she could be away from home her educational refuge.

Even though Walls does not have a constant building to use as her sanctuary, she used all the educational experiences from her life. Any chance she had to learn was time away from the chaos of home. A school can also become a safe haven for someone even if they are not the ones actually taking classes there. I remember when my daughter started attending Head Start. Parents were encouraged to volunteer their time to help assist the teachers. I was not working at the time, so I started going every day. Before I realized it, I was looking forward to going to school as much as my daughter was. I was making theme-oriented bulletin boards, helping organize activities and even sitting on the Head Start Parent committee. It gave me a purpose for living other than just being a mom and the courage to stand up to my fears. At a time in my life when I needed a feeling of worthiness, an educational institution had become my little piece of heaven on earth. Just as Walls, used the Wave and the time she spent working on it as grounds for why she stayed late at school or missed lunches, I was using the pretext of volunteering as a way to get away from the disappointment of my life, even if it was only for a few hours every day.

Are schools really sanctuaries? The answer depends on the way a person views their own or the experiences of others. After reading “Sanctuary of School” by Lynda Barry, The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls and after assessing my own personal experiences, it has convinced me even more that schools can and will continue to provide a safe, secure, and stable environment for many under privileged and privileged people from the pitfalls of everyday life.

Works Cited


Ellington Galloway

It's where the streets are as black as night and the smell of death remains fresh like bread in a bakery. People turn on their hoses to wash the blood off of the concrete used as battlefields for gun fights. While small children watch the yellow tape being taken down, standing in front of the red brick store front that is polka dotted with bullet holes the size of quarters. These fights were fought by young soldiers, not in uniform but in white t shirts, baggy jeans and air Jordan tennis shoes. These oversized clothes are used as a defense mechanism to hide the guns on their waist line and the drugs in their long socks. It is where gang members have guns fit for the army and love to use them daily. It's not always this chaotic and dark but it can be an everyday thing. Some days are sunny but sunny days can get rained out at the blink of an eye by dark clouds of violence. So bring an umbrella when you come to St. Louis, MO.

The city streets are aligned with brick houses. Many homes have bars on the windows to keep the burglars from coming through. The sidewalks are filled with fast girls who wear clothes as tasty as an ice cream cone on the fourth of July. The prettiest one in front leads the way, howling, looking as a pack of hyenas. "Come here lil' boy!" the pack yells to the guy with the old school Monte Carlos or Cutlass Supreme, on the big rims, sitting tall like a Tonka truck. (If you have anything smaller than 22" rims, then you are a small fry getting small money). If these guys were smart then they have a pistol in a stash spot some where close or they ride with a gun lying on their laps. The guys in the cars are targets according to the boys on the corner. Through their eyes, there is a dollar sign shining above their head like an angel's halo. They have thoughts of robbing them and taking their belongings to pay their next bill or feed their newborn child. If these guys aren't your friends, then they're your worst enemies. They range from all ages, young and old. Different sized guys have different caliber weapons to solve their problems. They appear as a pack of wolves, hungry with mean faces and gritting teeth showing (Except their fangs are gold) with their adrenaline pumping like gas at a gas station. They all have that thought in the back of their mind of the jail time they face if caught with what they possess. Some ease the pain with weed smoke and liquor sipping. Others get high off of the thrill of the kill or just causing pain and sorrow. It seems to them that there's not enough time in the day. When there is always an opportunity for a dollar to be made on the corner, their feet stay planted on the concrete.

There is no waiting until night time for the goons to come out. Anything can happen at any given time. They sit on porches made of brick with a set of bushes near them where they put some of the products they sell and laying next to it is an assault rifle or some kind of pistol that is too big to run from the police with and too big to hide under their t shirt. (If worst comes to worst, they toss their guns and drugs because these things are as common as street lights and aren't worth the jail time). One hundred round clips and they're fully automatic. Their itchy trigger fingers are just waiting for some static. To some, this may sound like an action movie, even though Rambo could live up the street or next door. The world is becoming so dangerous almost every household owns a gun. What happens when you have to pull your gun? It's either kill or be killed. Who will fire first? Think fast and don't let someone else make the decision. Friends kill each other everyday over money and drugs. There is no love in the streets. Show no love, love will get you killed. Depending on whom you ask St. Louis can be the most beautiful place you will ever lay your eyes on. To the next person, the thought of St. Louis disgusts them like a pregnant woman in the morning. But if you ask me, I would call it home sweet home.
In my room, on top of my dresser, I have my football helmet from my senior year of high school proudly displayed. I received the helmet as a Christmas gift from my parents the Christmas after the season ended my senior year. The helmet is royal blue with a white face mask and has my player number, 64, on the back. There are also many award stickers on the sides, back, and top for various accomplishments, such as defensive and offensive player of the game, limiting the opposing team to a certain number of rushing and passing yards, sacks, and turnovers that the team and I achieved during the season. The helmet has many scars and marks from all the contact that it has made with all of the different players that I have battled against. I have not used the helmet since the season ended in the fall of 2006. When I look at the helmet it reminds me about all the great memories of playing football in high school and all that being involved in the sport taught me that I can apply to life now such as being competitive, fearless, and a team player.

Success in life often translates into the ability to be competitive, which is one of my greatest accomplishments that I think of when looking at the helmet. One of these memories was competing against some of my friends and teammates for the starting position of offensive tackle, defensive end or defensive middle linebacker, kickoff, and kickoff return every week. Even though we were all friends on the team, I had to work harder than the other players who wanted the same position that I wanted. Luckily, my hard work was able to pay off from week to week because I was able to start every game my senior year in the position I was competing for. In the end, even though my friends and I were competing against each other every week, we were still able to remain friends. In life people must be competitive to have the ability to succeed in the work place and get the position they want, but that doesn’t mean I must be spiteful or not get along with the people that want the same job.

My most favorite memory when looking at the helmet is the act of being fearless, which was required during my years playing football in high school and also in life.

When I look at the helmet I see a long red scar from the paint of an opposing player of the Oskaloosa Bears’ helmet. I received this mark during a game while running down the field on a kickoff and crashed into a wall of five players that was blocking for the ball carrier. I plowed through the wall of opposing players and tackled the ball carrier, but ended up being knocked unconscious as a result. This play came at the end of the game and was important to the victory because without that stop they could have got the ball down the field far enough for at least a field goal that would have been able to win them the game. I had to be fearless to take the risk of getting hurt in order to make this game winning play. This reminds me that in life I need to be fearless and up to taking certain risks in order to achieve goals that might seem impossible.

Being a team player is not only essential to winning football games but also is an important life skill. This helmet reminds me of the undefeated season the team had my senior year, but one game in particular was the school’s homecoming game against the Pleasant Ridge Rams. Despite our best efforts, we were completely humiliated the year before, but my senior year was different. The game has been described as hard hitting. The team marched the ball up and down the field, and on defense we were causing turnovers and for the Rams to have to punt the ball. Everyone knew what they had to do, where to block for every play, and how to react for the formation that the Rams were running while they were on offense. We only accomplished this by working together to make each play run smoothly and be a success. If just one player did not pull his own weight on every play, then that play would have fallen apart, and we would not have obtained the win over the Rams or our perfect season. In life great things can be accomplished when I work with a team instead of trying to do everything by myself.

Playing football in high school gave me some really great memories that I think of when I look at my helmet, and also some real world lessons I learned from playing on that team such as being competitive, fearless, and a team player. I learned that being competitive in order to obtain positions I wanted does not mean that I cannot also be friends with my competitors. I also need to be fearless in taking risks to achieve goals that may seem, at first sight, out of reach. Finally, by working together as a team, I can accomplish amazing feats. I cherish these memories and lessons learned and will always be reminded of them when I look at my helmet.
“Life gives us brief moments with another... but sometimes in those brief moments we get memories that last a lifetime.”

I pass the make shift shrine on a daily basis, not paying attention to all the dust that lines the wooden shelves. I know in my mind I really need to dust it. Somehow some unconscious thought of leaving the dusty items that are stored on the shelves will forever remain in my memory if left untouched. There are a few items that appear to almost be touching the glass doors as if they were trying to press against the glass to escape. If they should ever prevail, would my memories of how I received the eight tracks and the chiseled rock along with my shrine disappear and why they are so special fade. Will memories of time be non existent like an elderly person who suffers from Alzheimer’s?

The three shelves and glass doors of what I call my “shrine” all came from my father’s old gun cabinet that he no longer had use for. He gave it to me, maybe so he wouldn’t have to haul it off somewhere. I would like to think he knew I would do something special with it. The smell of cedar is just as strong as the day he gave it to me, when he opened up the doors to take his collection of guns out. It now has different sides and top to it but to me it is still the same.

As a child my father and I would lay on our living room floor in the darkness listening to our favorite Elvis eight tracks. How I longed to be right next to the King as he recorded his symphony of music, or just the thought that he would sing to me. The eight tracks seemed new, the paper on the front that displayed the artist and title glisten as if just bought right off the shelf. Most of the casings were white like the first winter snow that has been untouched by muddy shoe soles. The paper now is ruffled at the corners and slightly lifting at the edges. Their a shade of a lighter yellow as well like a hibiscus leaf before it falls to the soil. Yellow and worn I dare not disturb them, for they may break and then how would I remember the rare but impressionable father daughter moment when he gave them to me when I was about twenty five. My parents were moving and there was no room for the extra box. He handed the brown box to me and said “You can have these; I have no room since we are moving to a smaller place.” I thought it was odd just because my father was the biggest Elvis fan I had ever known and now those memories of how he received each track now he just gave to me. Could it have been that he knew I would care for them and he loved me enough to have them?

When I was a teenager my parents always seemed to take a vacation. One year they went to Graceland. I remember crying how could they go to the one place I wish I could be every waking moment. Maybe finances or no room was the reasoning. When they returned my father brought me back a piece of the wall that lines Graceland property. He made a funny joke as to how he almost got arrested for chiseling it out of the wall. For years I actually believed that story, it made it more special in my eyes. I studied the ragged rough edges that was like a sharks’ tooth for hours. For something so old it still had its whitish gray color with a slight tint of yellow as I had seen in my fathers old magazines. There were black permanent lines that still remain to this day of part of someone’s message that they inscripted on the wall for all to view in passing. I felt a little sorrow for that, for the thought that of maybe I now hold someone else's memory. I wondered if everyone could still read the rest of the message on the wall that is now only half complete. I dismissed the thought hoping the stranger would understand, I needed this cement rock. I needed this memory, this connection to my father who was distant and seemed untouched by love. As I looked on the back of the rock there was a message to me “To my loving daughter Love Dad”, I just about cried till I noticed in was in my mothers handwriting. Perhaps he told her to write the message. I never asked, maybe for the thought she would say it was just something she wrote on her own.

In retrospect, I’d like to think my father gave me the items that I cherish because he was trying to say he was sorry for things he should have said and done. My objects have always reminded me of my father. The items like him are always existent but trapped behind a glass door, yearning to release theirselves but not knowing how. One would think these objects would be linked to sorrow but to the contrary their my memories, my shrine, my rock, my eight tracks they have had a hand in making me who I am and who I choose to become. The dusty shelves of my shrine remind me not to let things just pass me by. They have set a constant reminder to never forget to tell my children I love them before they lay their head to rest. I have vowed to show them and tell them they are important even when life is stressed. I want them to feel my love for them not just think I do as I still ponder and think about with my own father.

Even though my father wasn’t a very emotional loving man he gave me the rare memories that I will remember the most. The cabinet I made my own, the eight tracks that we would listen to, the rock from the home of my most beloved artist. He gave me those memories that would never mean as much if a stranger had handed them over. To
have these possessions that I can touch and hold seems to comfort my thoughts on how I was robbed as a child. Not feeling a warm embrace, nor feeling the love of my father.

I hope to one day give these precious gifts to my eldest son. If he will cherish them as much as I? Hopefully so. The one thing I would wish is that the meaning of the objects would differ from mine. I hope he doesn't have the memory of loving the material items so much just to comfort his own loneliness and lack of parental love. I would think it would remind him of our times singing karaoke to our favorite Elvis songs and watching the movies that seem to only come on during Elvis's birthday or anniversary of his death. I hope that his memories of me handing them to him will be that of love and happy times. For even though the objects and memories may differ in meaning, they will still represent a feeling. Whether it's a rare feeling that I experienced or a constant feeling that I hope I give him, it's a feeling and memory that only a parent and child share.

As the years may pass and life changes I hope my rare but fond memories of my father and his gifts will linger with me until my passing days. Hopefully my memories and objects will not forever stay trapped behind a glass door as my father's parental love and emotions do.

Ms. Eva Lee Sailor

Tiny branches still remain from the rose bush in between the two houses I once called both my own. Noticeably, the house I used to call my home, away from home lies dormant. Even though there are now strangers that occupy the tall two story white house. In some sense it seems somber and lonely. The woman who took shelter in this home away from home for many years, the one who minded the rose bush is no longer mending the broken branches, or putting a fresh coat of paint on the long pillars. It reminded me of the white house as a child, even though now looking at the house, it's quite smaller. Nevertheless it was beautiful and full of memories.

I remember the woman well who occupied the old house. Ms Eva Lee Sailor was her name. Her hair white as a cotton ball, which never seemed to flutter in the wind. A thick woman with broad shoulders she was, but beautiful with blue eyes as the ocean sea. I thought about how I first met her carrying a pail of water to the rose bush, which separated my home from hers. I was about ten years old and I had offered my help as she watered the bush that seemed to soak up every drop. She smiled, and handed me a pail of water. I sensed that not many come to help my new older lady friend water her rose bush. As I helped her, she explained to me that this bush needed water everyday and she offered the task to me. Of course, just moving to the neighborhood and not having made any new friends yet I was glad to have a friend even if it meant watering a bush. I gladly obliged and began the duty as my own. I sometimes got help from my younger brother, which I didn't mind. I wanted him to meet my new friend who soon became both of our friends.

After our rose bush talk we became like family, spending evenings watching the Lawrence Welk show, and at Christmas watching Bing Crosby. Enjoying birthday parties that she would throw for my brother and I, it was never much but much more than we had ever received. Most evenings there were stories which I found interesting but sad as well; stories of strife and hardship, stories of her being in love and it just never happened the way it should have. Stories of her being a nurse and helping wounded soldiers. And how she never had children which I felt sad about, but in my mind we were her children now or perhaps more like her.
grandchildren. At seventy years old she had all the instincts as if she had been a mother even though never baring one herself. I thought of her little dog, white and curly, Angel was her name, a poodle who became ours as well, but fierce when you should try and steal a hug from her caretaker of thirteen years. Maybe I thought our lady friend took comfort in her Angel, as it seemed she had no family.

I often would lay awake at night and think about a story she had once told me. The family she loved so dearly had all gone to another place. A place where joy and happiness is constant. I was astonished of her bravery when she spoke of her mother and how her mother took care of all these “young ‘ens” who seem to be very ill from the water from a well, which caused them to have a fierce fever. She explained that as she got better from this hellsish illness she was left with the duties of caring for her siblings for her mother as well fell ill with this fever. She lost her mother and one of her sisters to this fever that never cooled. I thought how could this woman ever be the same after such an experience, how could she not be angry? So as children often do, not quite understanding that some things shouldn’t be brought up, I asked my white haired lady friend why she isn’t sad or angry that she lost her family. She replied, “When the right time comes you will see.” I thought how odd, what was I to see, and when would this mystery be revealed, what would I see?

So I went on and did my duties as caretaker of the rose bush and never questioned my friend again about the comments that made no sense to me. Until one day as I was mowing the lawn of my home I accidentally got to close to the rose bush that oh the sweet lady loved so dear. I pondered on how exactly I was to tell her, fearing the worst, and I saddened myself because I so loved that bush that I had help grow to an astounding two feet tall. Would she hate me and tell me to go away and never come back to my home away from home? I made my way up the stairs taking each step as slow as the last hoping that maybe somehow it was all just a dream and our rose bush would come back. As I made it to the last stair she greeted me, I cried and spoke of the awful deed I had done, waiting for an angry expression, and a good talking to. She smiled to my surprise and grabbed me by the hand and led me to the backyard about fifteen feet from where the broken rose bush lay. There to my surprise was new beautiful flowers that just seemed to have bloomed, they were almost as perfect as the roses I thought to my self but didn’t dare say. But I can’t remember seeing these flowers and I hadn’t watered them before.

She began to speak and I automatically thought this was it the dreadful talk that I longed to hide under a rock for, but she spoke softly as a grandmother to a grandchild “Do you remember how you asked me why I am not sad or angry because my family is gone?” I replied in sadness, “Yes.” Well she explained even though things die or move on, there is always something new that sprouts up, you may never know when or why, but they or it can bring you the same joy as that which has died or moved on. Sometimes things fade away but there’s always a new blossom around the corner. Now as a young girl I wasn’t quite sure what all this talk really meant all I knew at that moment was she still loved me even though of my bad deed.

As I grew to a woman that conversation lingered in my thoughts at night, and even though I don’t live in the house that once sheltered my home away from home from the wind. I would often drive by and still could see those same beautiful flowers bloomed and much bigger than I remember. I realized as I became a mother and found myself losing some things that I had loved. What she had really meant when she spoke of how some things die or move on and another sprouts, it was all about life. Granted it’s painful when we lose something so dear but a new joy can come into your life. As having a new baby to cradle in your arms, or a new love, or in my lady friends case two children who brought her solace and joy. Even though her family had passed, we became her family and shared life with her as long as possible. Though I always have believed she thought we brought so much to her, I hope she knew the impact she had on my life and how grateful I am to her. How she changed it all just by a smile on a windy summer day, standing by a rose bush.

As a mother, I now repeat the same story my white haired lady friend had told me. I know that they as I did, they don’t quite understand my mumbles and stories of a great lady who taught me many things about life. One day I will grab them by the hand and lead them to a set of new blooming flowers, for which I will explain to them life’s greatest mysteries, on loss and life and of new beginnings. I hope to explain it with such love and understanding as she had once done with me.

Through experiences in life you in turn can teach someone else your experiences and that can be the greatest gift of all that you may give someone. I gained much appreciation for the little things in life we all seem to take for granted unconsciously. I became more acceptable to losing and letting love in and understanding that things happen for a reason that we may not understand at the time, but in time we will see that there is a purpose for everything. A person’s trials and tribulations can bring comfort to another who may be experiencing those same things. I also remind myself when things seem to tough and there doesn’t seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel, my thoughts swarm to the white haired lady and all her stories and how I know she would want me to see the new blooming flowers flowing in the wind.
Caroline Bird wrote an article entitled, "Where College Fails Us" in which the main idea is that higher education is not suitable for every person. The article shows college as an institution that many people attend due to pressure placed on them. They feel they have to attend an institute of higher education in order to succeed. Therefore, many feel it as a societal obligation rather than a desire. Bird’s article relates that only those who truly want to learn should go to college. The article shows that many college graduates major in something and end up doing something else with their degree due to the low number of jobs in that field. Many of the facts written in Bird’s 1975 article are still true to this day. Not everyone should go to college because some attend due to pressure from others, some are simply not ready for college right out of high school, while others even though they major in something will end up doing something else with their degree.

Many people go to college due to pressure not because they truly want to learn. Those that truly want to learn will succeed while those that do not will not. Often their attempts fail and they do not succeed in the end. High school graduates believe they should attend due to the fact that their parents have been telling them this since they were very young. In Bird’s article it says, “Students tell us the same thing college counselors tell us- they go because of pressure from parents and teachers and stay because it seems to be an alternative to a far worse fate” (paragraph 6). Pressure from parents, teachers, and society as a whole is immense. Parents, especially, make one feel that pupils should attend college. Parents tell young adults without college they will not succeed. Many people at times seem to think that college is the only way to a decent job or a good living. Pressure placed on potential students from society makes them feel they have to go to college. Society tells young graduates if they do not go to college it will let others down.

Once out of high school, students are not always ready for the rigors and challenges of college. Many think they can go to college, party, skip classes, and still get a passing grade, just as they did in high school. When these students do get to college, they will be in for an eye opener. These high school graduates will realize that they cannot stay up late and expect to have the capability to pay attention in class the following morning. Students come directly out of high school, often not prepared for college. The first time that a teacher requires young people to think and apply what they learn is in their first college class. Many drop out because they are not ready for the challenge of true academic learning. Evidence is found in Birds statement that, “Others find no stimulation in their studies, and drop out-often encouraged by college administrators” (paragraph 2). College, a challenge for future students, if they are not ready for that then they should not look to go to college in the first place.

College students often major in one thing and then go on to a profession in something that has nothing to do with the field in which they majored. The rate at which people graduate from certain areas of study augments faster than the needed employment in those professions. According to Bird’s article, “Many popular occupations may seem to be growing fast without necessarily offering employment to very many” (paragraph 12). Many will never use the degree that they earned at an institute of higher education, such as college. People attend college and get a degree in a certain field only to later realize that they wish to do something else. Someone could become a taxi driver yet have a bachelors in biochemistry. Many cannot attain a job in their field of study so they have to settle for something that has nothing to do with their degree.

Those that suggest that all people should go to college do not realize that not everyone truly wants to go to college. Some people do not like to learn, and college should be for those that truly want and wish to learn. The people that hold that everyone should go to college do not want to let a mass of young, somewhat mature, adults enter the world of responsibility and work. Some imply that college will make young people more mature and dependable. They theorize that having young adults go to college they makes them more mature and ready for life. If graduates have not learned maturity in their four years of high school what makes these people think that the students will somehow become more mature and dependable in college. Maturity comes with age and experience. When young people go to college it does not necessarily mean they will mature.

Not everyone should go to college and yet many do because of pressure placed upon them from authority figures and the education system. Students major in fields that they will not get a job in due to the likelihood that opportunities in those fields are not available. They go to college for an education even though they do not truly wish to learn. College should be for those who want to go to learn and gain knowledge. People should not attend college because of pressure placed on them by society. Students should go because they truly wish to. College exists for those who have a love of knowledge. Many people spend thousands of dollars
on an education that they never use. If someone intends to spend thousands of dollars on something it should be on something that they want, not something that they feel pressured into because of society, or because of pressure placed on them from parents and teachers.

I have always had a problem trusting people enough to let them get emotionally close to me. Because of this, I have always maintained a wall between myself and others. Some people do not know why they do that; I do. It took 27 years, but as my mother and I drove home from a visitation day, a thought occurred to me that I could not shake; I had to forgive my father.

My parents divorced shortly after I turned one. I do not remember them ever being together. Most children at least visit the parent who does not raise them, but that was not the case with my family. I saw my father maybe a handful of times when I was younger. Of those times, I have blocked most memory of him. I know that must seem strange. The one memory I do have of him, I don’t remember having the knowledge that he was my father. I just remember a tall man who bought me a stuffed koala and took me to an old lady’s house.

My father was not a good man. Most people say that and mean that their fathers did not want to spend time with them, or that they did not care about their families; so they just left. In other cases they get a jaded view because their parents could not get along and they sided with one over the other. In my case, it was because my father had a strong liking for small children, mostly boys.

I am grateful to my mother that as I got older and started asking questions, she never hid anything from me. She explained the circumstances as she thought I was able to understand them. I grew up with the knowledge that my father was in prison and for what reason. I grew up knowing that he had a problem with telling the truth. I grew up hating him for what he had done and the pain he had caused so many families. I also grew up being very ashamed of who he was. That, in part, made me ashamed of who that possibly meant I was. I did not want to let anyone get to know the real me. What if they saw something that confirmed I was like him? However, my curiosity over the person he was, and whether I was like him, got stronger as I got older.

When I was a teenager, I started writing him while he was in prison. I asked a lot of questions and received no answers to anything that I really wanted to know. I had this overwhelming desire to know why he molested children. If
he thought that was okay, then did I have a chance of turning out like that? After exchanging several letters all I had were more questions. I was very frustrated over his avoidance of the subject, so I quit writing him.

I tried seeking out the answers to my questions by researching his side of the family. This research put me in contact with several different members of his immediate family. There were aunts, uncles and cousins I never knew I had. To them, it did not matter that I was my father’s daughter. I was given a great gift in them accepting me for who I was. I was welcomed into a very loving family who accepted me with their arms wide open. In talking to them, I learned some of the information that I sought. I learned about my father as a child and some things that had gone on in his life. I learned that he had been abused as a child. Instead of taking into consideration what this might have done to his psyche, I condemned him even more. How could he subject innocent children to molestation when he knew what they would be going through? Had he not been there himself? I was also told of the drugs and alcohol that colored his world. At that time, I was unable to understand how those two things could so change a person. I made a vow to myself to do all I could to ensure my father would never hurt anyone again. I also vowed to be a better person than he was. This motivation drove me to the person whom I have become.

I had no desire to have any contact with my father until many years later. From time to time I wondered if he was out of prison, but I was never motivated to actually find out. The desire to find out came to me from an unexpected source. Sometimes God has an unusual sense of humor.

My little brother, whom I had always been very close to growing up, got involved heavily in drugs and alcohol. No one in my family saw the signs and the dangerous path he was headed down, until it was too late. One night while my brother was high as a kite and drunk off his rear, he did the unthinkable. My gentle little brother was accused of raping a woman. From this, he ended up with a very long prison sentence. Even though I disapproved, I never changed my views of my brother and I never quit visiting him. That was not the brother that I knew and loved. My mother and I attended visitation days together frequently.

During the drive home from one of these visitation days, mom and I were discussing my brother. I was reassuring her that no matter what happened I would stand by him. He was my brother after all, my blood. I told her that I knew in my heart that my brother had been forgiven by God. God loves all his children, all they have to do is ask for forgiveness. I knew from many discussions that my brother had done this; and I also knew that he was truly sorry that this had happened. Because I knew my brother, and I knew he would never have done this when in his right state of mind, it was also easy for me to forgive him.

As I was reassuring my mom, a thought entered my head very softly at first. I could not believe what I was thinking. There was a small tickling whisper telling me that it was time, it was time to let the past go. I tried very hard at first to ignore this thought. I didn’t want to let go of what my father had done. I was much more comfortable with my hurt and anger towards him. I kept trying to shake this thought, but it was still there. I tried changing the subject. I tried turning up the radio. But there was this thought, this pesky thought, and it was not so much a whisper anymore. It was getting louder. Now was the time. It was time to forgive him. The forgiveness was not for my father; it was for me. I needed to let go of all of that emotional baggage I had been carrying for all of those years. I needed to feel at peace with my father. As I sat in that car, and the miles rolled by, I felt at peace with my father for the first time in my life. For the first time, I thought of him without anger and hatred. I had not expected to ever be able to forgive him. It took my love of someone dear to my heart to make me see his situation differently.

I needed to locate my father. I started my search at the last prison I had known him to be locked in. To my shock and dismay, I was told he had been released several months previously. I attempted to contact family members all of whom were also shocked to hear he was no longer in prison. After some extensive searching, I had given up looking for him. My father seemed to have dropped off of the planet. My mother was aware of my search. One day while she was online, she typed his name into a search engine on a whim, and there he was. I immediately sent him an e-mail. After I received a reply, we decided to have a telephone conversation. During this emotional phone call I told him that I forgave him. That admission to him opened up a lot of doors in our relationship. We are not close, as a father and daughter should be. I do not think I could ever open myself up enough to let that happen. However, we do make it a point to talk weekly.

Looking back on that moment today, I am glad that I worked through that part of my past. The first lesson that I learned through this experience was not to judge people based solely on my observations. There are stories and reasons behind the actions that are seen being carried out. The problem is most people never bother to ask the question why? The second lesson I learned was how to view myself differently. Letting go of my feelings towards my father did not necessarily change my ability to let people get close to me. I still have a wall that I am sure will never come down. However, I have lost the reasoning that was constantly making a comparison between the two of us. I am still ashamed of what my father has done, but I am no longer ashamed of who I am in relation to him. I am not afraid to talk about him anymore; I just do not willingly share the
information with people. Sometimes it is easier, sometimes it
is harder, but letting go of all that emotional baggage was
definitely better.

Many people have traveled down that worn-out asphalt road. I can hear the hum of the car's tires slowing. I pull my car into the drive and the familiar crunch of gravel lets me know I am almost there. Slowly, my car weaves its way past row after row and there is a gentle squeak as it slows to a halt. The door dings as I climb out of the car and my feet lead me to the place where I know he will be waiting. I softly say hello; finding myself as close as I can get to a place that my younger self always wanted to be. As I sit down on the cold damp earth and smell the freshly cut grass, I pull away a few weeds. My hand brushes away the leaves that have been blown in by time. As I touch that unyielding stone, I can feel his arms come around me once' more. I shiver at that ghostly embrace and bask in its warmth; my memories drift back to being a child. I am being lovingly cradled against my grandfather's cushy chest; it is the best place in the world.

My parents were very busy when I was growing up. My mother worked long hours and when she was not working; she was making her way through nursing school. My step-father worked across the state and was rarely home until the weekends. I grew up in a family with four siblings. As the oldest child, it was often my responsibility to help take care of the younger ones. This meant that I had to be like a little adult. I helped to make sure they did their homework and stayed out of trouble after school. I also vacuumed the house, did the dishes, and started supper to help my mom out. When I was younger it was fun to pretend I was all grown up. However, as I had to take on more and more responsibility, playing "mommy" lost all sense of grandeur. I started to feel resentment towards my siblings because they did not have to do all of the things that had come to be expected of me. I was very lucky that I had somewhere to escape to.

There was a very special bond between my grandparents and myself and I spent almost every weekend with them. There were no other children in their neighborhood to play with so I spent a lot of time by myself or playing with one or the other of my grandparents; this did not bother me at all. Every weekend I had a chance to be a child and to let my imagination roam wild. I learned to enjoy quiet time with a great book and my room would magically
become some far off place. I also received tons of mail to my room. Grandma used to let me have all of their junk mail, so I was a millionaire because Ed McMahon was regularly sending me "checks" in the sweepstakes. Most of my happiest memories are centered on those two very loving people who always took the time to make me feel special.

I was especially close to my grandfather. When people commented that I was a "poppa's girl" they were very right. There were few places that my grandpa went that I was not right by his side. From the time I arrived in this world until the time he left it, my grandfather was not merely my grandfather. He was the replacement for the father that I never really had. As far as I was concerned my grandfather woke the sun in the morning and hung the moon and stars every night. I believed there was not an injury he could not fix, a task he could not do, or a pain that he could not mend.

Sitting on his lap I could feel the softness of his chest under my head. Leaning against him was like leaning on the softest pillow. I could burrow into his shirt and put my hand under his suspender strap and feel the comforting beat of his heart. As he talked and I lay there, I could hear his voice through his chest and feel the vibrations and the funny sounds it made as I listened to him made me giggle. While snuggling in his lap, my favorite thing to do was inhale his scent. To me that was the best smell in the world. He smelled of Old Spice, juicy fruit gum and a sweet sweaty smell. That smell is the smell of unconditional love and home. When I left his lap and walked away from his warm embrace all of the bad feelings I had would disappear and be replaced with warmth and the smell that my nostrils carried with me. Whenever I smell that smell today a smile crosses my face and I remember the love of the kindest man I have ever known.

When I was a little girl on grandpa's lap, cuddled to his chest, there was never a problem in my world. I could laugh there, I could cry there, I could tell him all of my worries and they would magically disappear. He would laugh with me or caress my back as I cried. If I had a skinned knee or banged up elbows his hugs and kisses immediately took away the pain. If I was worried about school, a friend or even a situation at home I could tell Grandpa and he would make me feel so much better. One of the times he really helped me to work out a problem, was when my best friend was contemplating running away from home. She trusted me not to say anything, even though I knew her running away would be disastrous for her future. I struggled with whether or not to say anything to her parents. Finally I decided to go talk the situation over with my grandpa. He helped me to see that doing the right thing was not always the easiest course. Grandpa pointed out that even though she may be mad at me now, eventually she would forgive me. Talking to her parents was one of the hardest things I had done up to that point, and she was very mad at me, but in choosing to take the right course it saved her from making a huge mistake. Grandpa was also right. She was mad at me, but after she thought about it she thanked me for stopping her, and she forgave me. My grandpa never acted like my problems were too small to deal with because I was only a child. He always had faith in me to do the right thing. He never intervened and left the harder choices up to me to decide a course of action. He just tried to help guide me in the right direction.

My grandpa was the one person I could always go to and no matter what I had done, he would pull me on to his lap and it would all be alright. That same patience and kindness continued as I got older and my problems got bigger. The first time I realized what a gift this was; I had been fighting constantly with my mom. My grandpa held me while I cried and then told me it was alright to be mad. He explained that my feelings were valid and I should not feel guilty for being mad at someone that I was supposed to love. He helped me to realize that even though you love someone you do not always have to agree with what they say or do. He also made me realize that talking things out with my mom was the correct course of action to take.

Grandpa's lap was not only a place to take my problems; it was also a place of happiness and learning. My grandpa owned his own trash company for many years. One of my earliest memories of being on his lap is learning to "drive" the trash truck. I was around four years old, and he would hold me on his lap and let me help him steer. I thought it was so much fun that I got to drive. He didn't let my brother go with him; that was special time for only me and him. I was so excited when he let me shift the gears. My little four year old arms weren't quite long enough to reach the shifter, and he had to hold on to me so I wouldn't slide off of his lap, but the laughter from trying is a cherished memory to this day.

After my grandfather passed away, I made the trip out to the cemetery to talk to him frequently. If I was hurt or upset over something that had gone wrong it made me feel better to go talk the situation out with him. Most of those first conversations were about me learning to cope without him. As the years have passed, I have traveled that road many times. I have told my grandfather of great disappointments in my life, of things that have made me joyously happy, and of things that have cut me so deep I was not sure I would ever survive them. I have shared with him when loved ones have passed on, my decision to return to school, and a decision to leave a love that was not the love I once believed it to be. When I go out and sit by his grave, I curl up as I used to and talk to the man who had the magical power of making my world better. Even though I know he is not really there, I can still feel him listening to me and helping to guide my decisions.
Gun shots. Burning villages. The terrors of war. My father has seen it all back home in Africa. While to me these disturbing sights would change my state of mind, my dad says that the events that took place in his life made him the person he is today. He was in the SPLA, which stands for Sudan People’s Liberation Army. They fought for the rights of the Southern Sudanese people who were being mistreated by the Islamic Sudanese from North Sudan. He fought for his country and the rights of his people in the war over oil and religion between the two regions of Sudan in the 1980’s. To protect his family he had to leave Africa in 1995 and start all over in a new country that was very different from his own. Even though I was still only 5 at the time I felt like I had gone to a whole new planet.

The weather in California was different, the scenery was different and even the people were different, it was America, and to my family it was a drastic change. It was overwhelming. But my dad kept our family together which made it easier for me and my siblings to cope with the change that was to come. To my Parents it was hard leaving other family members in Africa and coming to America, they were leaving people that they loved and didn’t know if they would see them ever again, but my dad did it because that’s what he had to do in order for his family to see better days. Our war-torn country didn’t defeat my dad because he didn’t allow it to. He got out and made a better life for us, even today when he hears about everything that’s going on in Sudan, he still remains strong for our sake. My dad speaks of the Darfur genocide where the Sudanese government recruits Arabs from local Arab tribes to kill that particular group of people in Darfur, Sudan this militia is known as the Janjaweed. I use to think that what was happening in Darfur had nothing to do with us but my dad told me that the Janjaweed were the reason he joined the SPLA. When my dad speaks of the SPLA his face lights up you can tell how proud he is of that army and how passionate he is about it. He tells my siblings and I all the time that this is not our Country and that the only thing we need to accomplish here is an education. He tells me this every time I use to come home from school and complain about how I was different from everybody else and that I didn’t fit in my dad would say “well why do you care if you’re different? Of course you’re different, and not everyone you meet is going to like you, just get your education and keep it moving.” Those were his words of encouragement and oddly they always helped me.

I remember one day I came home from school in fifth grade when this boy Daniel came up to me during recess and recited the lines from a movie called, The little rascals he said, “Dear Nyajuok I hate your stinking guts, you make me sick, you’re the scum between my toes, love Daniel” I just stood there Shocked with silent tears rolling down my cheeks. I was disgusted because this kid I barely knew had already decided that he hated my guts, and that I was the scum between his toes when he had never even spoken to me. It was all because I was different and new, I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. I went home upset that day and my dad told me that Daniel didn’t know any better.

My dad seems to always know what to say he has taught me that everyone I meet is not going to like me. Again in middle school when I use to come home, and tell him that I was talked about for being just a little bit different then everyone else he always had something to say to make me appreciate my roots, he would always start out with a different story and end by saying that being different makes me unique.

One story in particular that my dad told me and it made me realize that there are more important things in life then what someone thinks about you. We were in our living room one night sitting by our fireplace and I asked him why he joined the SPLA if they were considered a rebellious group by the government of Sudan, he told me the Muslims of Sudan were trying to force the southern Sudanese to convert to their religion and to believe in everything that they believed in because they thought their beliefs were right and people who resisted were usually killed, so the SPLA was formed to protect our people from the Sudanese government, which wanted everyone in Sudan to be Muslim. My dad said they had to stand up for what they believed was right.

That day it was like something clicked in my head, I understood just how great my dad was because he could have given in and changed his religion like so many others in our country but he didn’t. I look up to my dad mainly because of that reason. I don’t know how far I would have gotten if my dad wasn’t around to motivate me when I needed a little Push. Like the little push I needed when I wanted to switch schools because I felt that it was just too much to handle he told me that I shouldn’t let people get in the way of what I want to accomplish, he reminded me that I had my family real friends and everyone else shouldn’t matter, my dad has motivated me to do better because he tells me that he didn’t have the opportunity that I have because his country is war-torn, he went back to high school when I was younger and got his diploma sitting at his graduation I must have been the...
proudest little girl there I was so excited that I couldn’t sit in
my still in my seat.

I remember waiting for his name to be called and
when they finally said it I was so overwhelmed with joy. He
got on to finish the rest of his higher education, he went on
to get a business degree and is planning to go back to Africa
and use his degree to help the people, whose villages were
burned down by building shelters, starting a bus route and
building hotels. I decided that I could do the same thing and
use my education to help others not only in Africa, but in
other third world countries.

Not only have my dad’s actions inspired me but his
stories that he shares with me have also helped shape the
kind of person I am. Now I’m proud of my roots and I’m a
strong and motivated girl who knows what I want out of life
and will work hard to get it just like my dad, I’m going to use
my education to help third world countries, because I know
that some people aren’t as lucky as I am I don’t take anything
for granted.

Nature is valuable to an artist. Many artists get
inspiration and ideas from the beauty in nature. Also, it helps
them to release stress. Seoul, the capital city of Korea, is a
complicated and busy city. In other words, it is hard to find
nature in this man-made city. My high school was located in
Seoul. Fortunately, there was a natural and charming spot
named “Yego Garden” at the back of the school. Yego Garden
was full of creative ideas and helped me to forget my stressful
school life for a while.

My high school was Seoul Arts High School. The
school is famous, not only in Korea, but also in other nations.
Many artists from the school perform in lots of countries of
the world. My high school orchestra, Seoul Yego Youth
Symphony Orchestra, was and is visited by lots of nations
and has presented numerous recitals in Korea, America, and
Europe. Also, we participated in numerous music festivals. In
2004, my school orchestra was invited to play in the New
York Symphony Orchestra Festival. During a music tour in
America, they performed at various famous halls, including
Carnegie Hall. The school has trained many talented students
and they are very professional. I was a lucky person to study
in this school.

But, at the same time, my school life was so stressful.
When I got into the school, my whole family’s expectations
were really high because of the fame of my school. My
family’s expectations about my successful school work
weighed heavily upon my mind. To match their expectation, I
did my best, but sometimes the result was not good.
Whenever I got a bad score, I couldn’t bear the moral
pressure. I could not enjoy my school work because of this
stress.

Also, surviving from the fierce competition between
these talented students was hard and tough work. Every day I
had to compete with other students not only in general study
but the piano as well. These competitions became more
competitive when we took an exam. As my school was the
arts school, I had to take two different types of tests. One was
a general study test and the other one was the piano exam.
The piano exam was more stressful for me. We took the piano
exam each semester and I had to prepare three or four pieces
of music for each semester. In addition, music department
teachers gave me an extra piece and only one month to prepare it. One month was not enough to complete the music. Of course, memorization was required for all repertoires. So whenever the test day came near, the school changed like a battlefield. On the announcement day for the ranks from piano test, my school was full of tearful voices. The department recital made me stressed also. For this, I needed to prepare one more piece and play in front of many other students and teachers. For all these reasons, I needed my own place to catch my breath and forget all of these stressors. Luckily, the nature surrounding my school helped me.

My school was not too big, but it had a natural beauty. We had only three buildings in the school. The main building was for general study and music majors, and the other buildings were for dance majors, art students, and a cafeteria. My school had a long history so the buildings and equipment were old. However, a big mountain surrounded the school like a wall and the buildings were located so high that I could touch the clean sky. A stream, between the buildings, laughed in the sun and a sound of a bell was faintly heard from the temple in the mountain. The beautiful sound of nature behind the buildings made the school antique and classic.

Yego Garden, that was behind the main buildings, like the Garden of Eden, was my best place. The garden was between the main buildings and the cafeteria. The place was full of the warm sunlight and cool wind. I didn’t need my MP3 player in this place because nature made a beautiful sound. When I closed my eyes sitting on a flat rock and listened carefully, I could hear the symphony from nature. A breeze blew softly and the leaves rustled in the wind. The leaves and breeze made the most beautiful, perfect harmony with the murmur of a small stream. Besides that, the garden had various faces each time the seasons changed. In the spring and summer, the garden was covered with splendid colors and then the place became even more charming in the fall. The whole mountain turned red and was ablaze with autumn tints. In the winter, its face changed completely. Only calm and silence remained in there. All trees and sculptures in the garden were covered with glistening white snow. The scenery of the icy snow flakes on the empty branches was awesome.

A traditional octagon (like a gazebo), lots of sculptures, and the small arch across the stream melted into nature and added more beauty in the garden. The sculptures and the stone bridges were made especially by the art students. The sculpture was carved with great delicacy in stone and wood, and they made a mysterious impression. These sculptures looked like real animals or men, and seemed to move. The works also gave me amusement and some ideas for my piano work.

I usually went to Yego Garden with my friends whenever we had concerns. Actually, the place didn’t have a name. My friends and I just called that place “Yego Garden”. We had a secret place in the garden where we chattered about the tough piano practice, lessons, and the strict teachers easily. One day, I got my piano grade and it was not good. I couldn’t tell this grade to my teacher and my parents. After the school, I couldn’t go back to my house so I just went to my secret place in the garden. I turned off my phone and wept in secret. After a while, my friend came to the place to find me. She held my hand tightly and cried with me. She said nothing but I felt her warm heart. I cried bitterly for a long time and it eased my mind.

In the hot summer, my friends and I went to the stream every time we had lunch. We took off our shoes and put our feet in the cool water. Sometimes, we played in the water. My friends and I splashed the water on each other until our clothes were wet. Although my school uniform was soaking wet, all my stress was gone from my mind after playing in the cool water. My emotion was getting better and my mind was refreshed.

If I felt lost about my music when I practiced in the school, I just went out of the piano practice room to the garden. When I went out of the main building through the back door, the beautiful sight spread before my eyes. It was definitely different from the stuffy small practice room in the building. The enclosed practice room had no window. There was just a piano and a fluorescent lamp. Compared to the practice room, the garden was like heaven. Nature gives a motive to musicians because many musical works are from nature. Some musicians get motivation from the fire or sound of the water. At that time, I practiced “Jeux d’eau” by Ravel. The piece was about water and including many different views of water. Therefore, when I practiced that music I was a frequent visitor of the garden. I found lots of various images of water from the stream and trees. The water staggering along the mountainside, swirling over the rocks, and dripping from the leaves gave me vivid images and inspiration for my music. When I came back to the practice room, I approached my music newly and played more interestingly.

Yego Garden was my treasure that gave me lots of gifts, not only the ideas, but the emotional security. The garden was the best creative place for me to make my music more colorful. Also, the time in this place helped me to recover my composure. For a while, my stressful thoughts vanished from my mind and just enjoyed the marvels of nature. This fascinating place is still vivid in my memory. I hope the garden keep existing in my school forever and shows its peaceful face to many students.
Its 11:17, two emergency medical technicians speed through the emergency room doors. Heads turn and nurses rush over to the 8-year-old boy with suspected skull fracture. He is unresponsive, hypoxic, and has drainage in his ears! The emergency room is a place where people go to receive immediate care. Some situations are worse than others. The patient may need stitches or, may need CPR, either way, the emergency room is open 24/7 for life’s emergencies. I learned so much from my emergency medical class, in which I put to use in the field by completing clinical hours in the hospital and in the emergency room, and I received volunteer hours, credit towards my EMS class and a once in a lifetime experience.

It was April of 2009 when I started doing clinicals for my emergency medical services class. Being in the emergency room was quite the experience, especially since I was not in there as a patient, but as the help. My first day in the emergency room I was nervous and was not sure what to do or even what I was going to do. How many bad incidents really happen in one day? And what are the odds that the emergencies are life or death situations? I had no clue what I was getting into but I warmed up to it just after the first 12 hour shift there. I had never really been in the emergency room before, so while I was there I decided to show myself around.

The common room in the emergency room is rather small in size, containing a hospital bed covered up in fresh linen and cold metal rails on either side. Hung on the walls were small television sets. Above the sink were a set of cabinets containing bed sheets along with the blue and white gowns that reveal your back side. The rooms are always cold, but surprisingly you can not see your own breath. With the white tiles with black specs below your feet supporting you in your room, it helps you realize that you are not at home. The rooms have no distinctive smell. Crammed next to the bed is a plastic, uncomfortable chair meant for the people with the patient, such as, family or friends.

One shift was different than any other shift I had ever worked. My crazy shift all started when a middle aged man busted through the doors on a stretcher blue in the face. He was quickly rolled into a small room. He was put in one of the rooms on my side of the emergency room that the person I was shadowing and I were in charge of caring for. I was pulled into the room with the man. He was about 250 plus pounds, and he needed CPR. A nurse named Zack signaled me to come towards him. I knew how to do CPR but I had never practiced it on anything other than a dummy in my emergency medical services class. The man was large, and I couldn’t even see over him. Zack pulled a stool over and I stood on it and started doing vigorous compressions. As I completed his 30 compressions, the nurse delivered two breaths to the patient. During the process of giving CPR, I had experienced my first adrenaline rush. As my blood pumped fast through my veins, I had gained strength I never knew I had. Unfortunately the man didn’t survive, but as for the 8-year-old boy who was unresponsive, hypoxic and had drainage in his ears, he made it through his tragic accident. Before my time in the emergency room was up, I ended up having to do CPR three different times and got to experience things most people won’t in their lifetime.

When my side was slow or pending on test results, I sat back and noticed nurses and doctors transferring from room to room checking the patients. Basic vital signs are checked periodically of each patient, then charted and told that the doctor will be in soon to give some answers. I had no idea that the emergency room had so much business. Working in the emergency room changed me by making me more aware of the bad situations that occur and gives me more of an understanding of the medical field. I learned so much from my emergency medical class such as: how to deliver a baby, give cpr, and how to splint an injured extremity. Along with my EMS class I received a once in a lifetime experience by being able to apply the skills I have tried so hard to practice and learn to use to help people.
I look down at the clear blue water of the Atlantic, “I’m going back home”. Walking off the plane I feel a wired feeling going across my whole body in a good way. The cool ocean wind feels relaxing hitting my face and right behind it the heat rises reminding me that I’m not in Kansas City anymore. I see my family in the airport terminal, yelling and jumping around like kids on the playground. When my feet hit the ground and I feel as if I never left. Jamaica may be about 7 hours away from Missouri, but I receive the same family love.

My legs shook rapidly in the van. I could not wait to see what surprise my grandmother, Ms. Adasa Holness, had for me at the house. We pull up to the house and I discovered that my surprise was my own cousins, Rattie and Chris. They were waiting on the stairs with a big juicy mango in their hands making a mess. I jump out of the car to get tackled to the ground by my cousins because this is how we say hello to each other. I was just mad that they beat me to it because the ground was very hot.

Although my cousins are twins it is easy to tell them apart because of their appearances and their personalities. Rattie is the older twin by two minutes and trouble finds him like a bad cold in the summer. He is the rebel in the family. He loves to test someone’s last nerve to see how far he can push your buttons before you turn red with anger. The only person he does not try this with is our grandmother because she will slap him into next Tuesday. Chris, on the other hand, is more goal oriented when it comes to money. He holds on to it as if it was his last cent. Chris is more level headed when it comes to dealing with problems. When my cousins and I get together we can get into a lot of trouble, however, we also have the time of our lives. We are like the three stooges when it comes to doing things. We can try to do the smallest thing but it will still turn into the biggest mess.

Rattie and Chris are DJs that play at a lot of local parties and clubs in Jamaica. I like to go places with them; it is like having my very own passport to get into any big name party or event. “Love on the Beach” is the biggest D.J. event in Kingston. It is held every three years and my cousins received an invitation to perform in a competition. The winner of the competition earns bragging rights for three years as the best D.J.’s this side of Kingston.

The night of the “Love on the Beach” was not cold. However, the ocean breeze was chilly because it was coming from the north side of the island. My cousins and I could feel the breeze as we looked out from the stage. On the left side of the stage was the crowd of people waiting for the competition to start. The view to the right had been nothing but dark blue ocean water. All of the D.J.s had to be ready to go on stage in ten minutes or they would have to leave the competition. Rattie and Chris came up here to win the trophy so they could really say that they are the best that Jamaica has to offer.

It was Rattie and Chris’s turn to come to the stage and the crowd went wild like cage lions in the zoo wanting to get out. Rattie was already on the stairs to the stage, getting ready to do what he does best, but Chris was alone in the back of the stage. I asked him, “What’s worry?” His hands were shaking like he had seen a ghost. Now I know that he was scared because he had never had to be a DJ in front of a crowd this big. I asked him “Are you a tit tit boy or a rude boy?” Chris ran to the stage with a rude boy as if he had already won this contest.

Three hours later the judges told everyone that Rattie and Chris had won the D.J. contest with over seventy-five percent of the votes from the judges. The crowd went wild. The crowd could be heard for miles because of how loud they were cheering. Rattie and Chris started crying like babies who are hungry as they jumped around the stage. I clapped until my hands turned as red as cherries. Chris pulled me up onto the stage with a strength that almost broke my arm and said, “I couldn’t have done without my cousin Terrence by my side.” When he told me that I knew that I was not just someone in a crowd to them; I was family.

Afterwards, we started to walk back to my grandmother’s house. It was three in the morning and we continued to laugh even though we were scared deep inside of ourselves. We knew that we were not supposed to be out that late. We knew that we would get in a lot of trouble if our grandmother was awake when we got back. Rattie spoke suddenly saying, “Terrence, it’s your turn to think of a good lie from why we so late.” I had given him a look as if I could not speak English but the sun was not up yet so we still had time. Then, I took off like a bat out of hell because every second that we wasted got us closer to being in trouble.

Finally, we got back to the house. When we opened the door, it sounded like I was in a horror movie and someone was going to die. The creak from the door ripped through the thick silence. I wanted to turn back but Rattie and Chris pushed me forward as if I had wheels for feet. We tipped toed to the stairs like mice sneaking around the kitchen looking for food. Rattie and Chris got to their rooms as quiet
as a snake moving in the grass. However, I was not as lucky. Unfortunately, I had to go up another flight of stairs. My foot hit the first step and the sound it made could have wakened the dead. I looked up to see the next step and I also saw two blood red eyes looking at me like I was dinner. In my mind I felt like a robber with a spot light on me. It was as if I had been caught with stolen jewels in my hand. It turned out to be my grandmother, Ms. Holness, with a piece of two by four in her hand walking toward me. I closed my eyes to say a quick prayer because the only person who could have helped me would have been God.

Fortunately when I opened my eyes I was not in the emergency room, hanging onto life by a thread. Instead I found myself in her arms. Her tears made my shirt as wet as if I had just gotten it out of the washing machine. Her eyes were not red from anger. They were red from the tears of stress that came from worrying like a grandmother is supposed to worry. The only words she said to me were, "You don't want grandma to die before her time right?" I had shaken my head as I looked at her. I had felt as if I were eight years old again. Afterwards, as she walked up the stairs, she said, "You are my first grandson and you will always be my baby." When she left I stayed in the same spot for ten minutes thinking about what she had said. To hear those words come from her made me think. I had felt that kind of worry from my mother. However, I had not expected such a depth from my grandmother. I had known she had loved me but not to what extent. That day helped me know that her house would always be my home away from home because of the love I receive when I am there.

I cannot say that I'm a reader but, I do enjoy a good book. Books that can hold my attention recipe; a cup of entertainment with a hint of reality. Stories that I can relate to, well either that or novels that if they aren't real they seem to be. Don't dare feed me a bunch of fairy-tale happily ever after crap. I mean what is that really going to do for me other than sell me dreams? A good book is one where as soon as you're done with it you pick up a pen and a piece of paper feeling as if you can write one yourself right then and there. You know the books that start out in a Brooklyn, New York project but end in a Manhattan mansion because the main character of the novel somehow came up on a good deal. Those read in between were books - I barely read - to - barely get an “A” - The Cinderella stories and those similar always made me sick to my stomach, but a good book, a good book is my Nyquil that exterminates the illness and puts me right to sleep. As a child I do not recall my parents reading to me a lot if at all, I assume that my mother may have read to me a couple times because she does it with my younger sister. I do remember reading books in class though, you know books like the Bailey School Kids collection or Holes: the books you had to read to get a grade. Those books were the ones that introduced the idea that a book can actually hold my short attention span. I figured any book that can cause a nine, ten year old kid to stay in the house rather than go outside has to have something good in it - right -. The Captain Underpants, Goosebumps, and other selections that were on the bookshelf that were in the class were books that I read to pass time when I’d completed my homework before everyone else and had nothing else to do. You know just stories to make me chuckle for the moment, but once I got my hands on a novel - a good novel - it was hard to get a hold of me. Sometimes I’d even get in trouble for reading in class while the teacher was trying to teach. Mrs. Maddox my fifth grade teacher would say to me in a monotone type of voice, “Tanisha, I’m very glad that you’ve found something to keep you quiet for once but can you please put the book away and pay attention to what I am teaching now, maybe in your free time you can read.” I replied, “But I really like this book I don’t want to stop reading it, it was just getting good.”
“I don’t care, I’m teaching, read later if I have to ask again I’m going to flip your card over,” she responded.

Lord knows I didn’t want to flip my card over (a system my school used to scare us), a card flip came with many horrible consequences like a field trip to the principles office or a call home to mom and dad, or the worst no recess. Since I didn’t want to lose my recess and I definitely didn’t want my teacher calling my mother or my pops for any reason I put the book away as she instructed. Well, I’d put it away long enough for her to think that I was listening to her blabber on about whatever the heck she was talking about. Then I’d peek in my desk where I had the book laid open turned to the page I left off on and I’d sneak a paragraph or two in while she wasn’t looking. That’s what a good book did to me. Reading also made me feel somewhat more intelligent than others, it felt good when someone asked if anybody had heard of a certain book and I could raise my hand to say that I’ve read it.

No lie, I felt like I was the smartest person in my class. Once I read books that others hadn’t read or when I read ahead of the class because I couldn’t take the suspense of a book: I felt real smart. I’d look up words that were beyond my vocabulary in the dictionary so that when the teacher asked if anyone knew what the word was I could raise my hand and be what they call a “teacher pet”. When reading Richard Rodriguez’s short story “The Lonely, Good Company of Books” I found that in comparison he also realized a certain intelligence when he read books - and he also liked to show it off - “Each time I finished a book, I reported the achievement to a teacher and basked in the praise my effort earned,” says Rodriguez. I guess it was impressive when people you wouldn’t expect to read tells you of a wonderful novel they’ve read. The only difference between Rodriguez and I is that he ONLY read books for the increase of knowledge. He’d read books of no interest just so that he could add the book to his list of things he’d accomplished reading. “Books brought me academic success as I hoped that they would,” he says in “The Lonely, Good Company of Books” a statement in unison with the idea that he only read for academic advancement rather than enjoyment. The vocabulary expansion was only half of the reason why I read books when I didn’t have to, the lessons taught within the pages were always the main reason.

Every book has a certain purpose is how I feel. Between the front and the back cover there’s a message that someone wants to convey to you. It can be an influential message, and informative message or a message that was created just to humor the reading and letting them know its okay to laugh. All in all every book is good in its own way. Ask me what’s the perfect recipe to a good book, and I’ll reply, “A cup of entertainment and a hint of reality.”
because we didn't really have anything but beds and televisions. I didn't care what we had on the inside I was just ecstatic about our fresh start my new home, new school and all of the new friends I'd planned on making. Well it seemed to be a fresh start until the feeling of déjà vu aroused as the same old' crap popped up.

Guess you're wondering what I'm talking about? I'll take you back, back to the previous run down ass apartment we lived in on the south side before my mom got her stuff together as I thought. I'll describe it to you in one word GHETTO! Dirty diapers scattered across the broken up concrete, the air tasted just like it smelled, like pure sewage. Right there on the corner of Meramec and California was where the building my grandmother, aunts, cousins and everybody else lived. A burgundy looking color, all brick building it was and it had random cardboard pieces which were spray painted with what was rumored to be gang tags. Hell I didn't know I never saw anybody spray painting anything so it could all possibly be a myth. Back to the story, it was in that apartment where I developed the begging of a grudge I would have against my mother still to this day. See she used to have this boyfriend, Dante Jones was his name. He used to beat ort her, beat on her bad right in front of my face; my mom never did anything or said anything to him about it to my knowledge, she just let it happen for years almost every day. I never wanted to come home from Latchkey I'd rather run around a gym and do homework rather than sit there to watch the most unfair boxing match in history. I know everybody knew that she got beat up, I mean she's Italian so she has a crème color her and she bruised easy, she looked like an Albano raccoon. The Cover Girl make up wasn't enough to cover the damage that was done. So where'd the grudge come from you ask? Well take a seat, this may be a while. One day I was home from school with Dante because I had a snow day at school and my mom had to work so it was just me and him. He'd asked me if any other men had ever came to the apt before and I replied and said yes, I mean plenty men would come by like my dad and uncles and everybody else lived. A burgundy looking color, all brick building it was and it had random cardboard pieces which were spray painted with what was rumored to be gang tags. Hell I didn't know I never saw anybody spray painting anything so it could all possibly be a myth. Back to the story, it was in that apartment where I developed the begging of a grudge I would have against my mother still to this day. See she used to have this boyfriend, Dante Jones was his name. He used to beat ort her, beat on her bad right in front of my face; my mom never did anything or said anything to him about it to my knowledge, she just let it happen for years almost every day. I never wanted to come home from Latchkey I'd rather run around a gym and do homework rather than sit there to watch the most unfair boxing match in history. I know everybody knew that she got beat up, I mean she's Italian so she has a crème color her and she bruised easy, she looked like an Albano raccoon. The Cover Girl make up wasn't enough to cover the damage that was done. So where'd the grudge come from you ask? Well take a seat, this may be a while. One day I was home from school with Dante because I had a snow day at school and my mom had to work so it was just me and him. He'd asked me if any other men had ever came to the apt before and I replied and said yes, I mean plenty men would come by like my dad and uncles and such. When my mom got home from work that day, he beat her like he never beat her before. I ran to the room crying, screaming, yelling; shit anything to distract this guy.

“Boom”, I didn't look I knew it was my mom falling and bouncing into things trying to run. But she could never get away for long. When he got done he told her exactly why he beat her like he did, “Tanisha told me that it was some other niggas in this house!” he said. My mom ran and grabbed her belt and beat me just like he did her except for the fact he threw punches and I only got the belt. Though I was young I understood and I was fed up with my mom that night. I felt enraged all the way down to my bones and my soul. She betrayed me, I never forgave her for that. I would think to myself what kind of parent continues to destroy themselves in front of their child over and over again. She sure seemed as if she had no problem doing it. After that I really never wanted to be bothered with my mom she just got on my nerves I'd rather just stay and play with my friends.

That same attitude followed me to Jerries Lane, well not when we first got there but when I saw that damn turquoise Mustang in my driveway. I thought to myself some things never change but to my surprise when I walked through the door my mom was giving him all the things she had of his. He slammed down a crystal glass and stormed out, that was the last I'd ever see of Mr. Dante Jones thank god but the grudge that I had against my mom stayed right in that house. I didn't plan on disliking her for a long time all I wanted was a sorry. She didn't even have to explain why she was saying sorry just simply say it because she allowed me to witness things that no child should ever witness for years. She sometimes even punished me for it. I still haven't gotten that apology I've been waiting for all these years, I kind of just gave up on it because I figure if I haven't gotten it by now then I'm most likely not going to get it.

About two weeks later I began my first day of third grade at Grannemann Elementary School with my teacher Mrs. Crume which would later become my favorite teacher of all time. She just understood me; never once judged me or passed me off as just a bad ass little black kid. See since I never got any attention at the house due to the fact that my mother was always working and going to school working on her second masters degree I acted out in class. I was the "class clown" as they say always had a comeback or a joke; I was a smart class clown though because regular class clowns only focused on entertaining people whereas I did my work then acted a fool. "This is not the proper timing," Mrs. Crume would squeal when I cracked a good joke while she was teaching and everybody busted out laughing. Deep down inside she loved me I could tell because she put more effort into me than the other students in my class. She'd always pull me to the side and teach me life's lessons and how I need to behave properly, you know the usual pep talk a grown up would give a kid my age. Well there was a kid who got the same attention as I did. His name was Kaylyn McClemore, he was my homeboy, and my best friend we did everything together. Well that same baton was passed off as just a bad ass little black kid. See since I didn't plan on disliking her for a long time all I wanted was a sorry. She didn't even have to explain why she was saying sorry just simply say it because she allowed me to witness things that no child should ever witness for years. She sometimes even punished me for it. I still haven't gotten that apology I've been waiting for all these years, I kind of just gave up on it because I figure if I haven't gotten it by now then I'm most likely not going to get it.
things, like if a piece of paper was on the ground she'd flip out. I always got the grief for it, at first getting spankings frightened me but my body began to get immune to it after a while. I knew the routine when I hear the garage door open I’d have to go to the basement naked and prepare for my spanking; I never used to take off all my clothes until my mom had caught on to the fact that I would wear like a ton of underwear so it wouldn't sting as bad. I hated when she came home I’d just lock myself in my room or go to the basement to play the game or play a good song on the computer and sing at the top of my lungs. That was my get away. I mean my mom never had time for me and I was the only child so I had to keep myself entertained somehow.

I found myself at 1255 Jerries Lane; I became Tanisha, I got in touch with my mind, my body and soul. I learned who I was; I learned when I needed time alone and how to cope with the madness that surrounded me. I learned that just because somebody has it going on, on the outside doesn't exactly mean that it mirrored the interior. I should know, I witnessed it firsthand. You're probably wondering what good did all these things teach me and how did it play a part in my life. Well the things that took place on the south side added strength and independence to my character. Sitting there watching your mother get beat and then feeling the stings of the belt as she whopped you for the things that went wrong in her life added a strong bone to my structure. Though I should've cried back then I didn't; Dante said it showed a sign of weakness so every time I wanted to cry I would suck up and deal with it. I wish I would've cried back then, that way I wouldn't have to ponder about the unknown tears that falls from my face every now and then. It would be nice to have a better response to someone who asked me why I was crying than, "I don't know." I don't mind shedding a tear now; I think it's the opposite of what Dante said. Crying isn't a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength; see it takes a weak person to fight their tears in fear of looking weak, but it takes a strong person to not be afraid of looking weak and letting a tear fall from their eyes.

At Grannemann I learned my personality; I usually pulled off the shy girl act when I went places that weren't familiar to me but there I was me. I was allowed to be me, though it wasn't always the right time I found my sense of humor. I got in touch with my intellect and became knowledgeable of my learning abilities. I found what made me happy, what helped me release my stress and what hobby's I picked up that would later become something I did every weekend. Who knew that ten years later instead of recording with a stereo and a beat up tape player that I'd be recording in real studios and hearing my music on the radio. I don't think I would've gotten in touch with my personality if Mrs. Crume wasn't my teacher, though she talked to me a lot she allowed me to be myself. I never told her anything but it seemed to me as if she knew everything and she knew that since I couldn't express myself at home that I needed to let go somewhere. So she allowed me to do it in her class room. She allowed me to interrupt her so I could blurt out something that the whole class and even she would find funny at times. All in all these particular places developed me and later on introduced me to a woman who goes by the name of Tanisha Logan.
was six I watched him kick the mortal hell out of a man in a fight. He was not a nice man, and could hold his own in a fight. "When I was six I watched him kick the mortal hell out of a man in a parking lot" (Bragg 7). Most people who know my dad consider him the nicest drunk they have met. He couldn’t fight if he had to, the whole 5’6” 130 lbs. of him. I remember a time when I was young, my mom and dad just got divorced. I asked my dad why he couldn’t quit drinking. All he said was, “A Miller never quits son.” He lost his license after my mom divorced him, and soon after we moved and I hardly saw him. He would call every now and then, but for some reason I never went to see him and he could never make it up to see me. I tried to make it up to see him once after I got my license, but I wrecked my car. I finally saw him at my graduation party. After two and a half years had passed, and I graduated high school, I moved in with him for college. Bragg’s dad never admitted to being wrong. “He never said he was sorry. He never said he wished things had turned out differently. He never acted like he did anything wrong” (Bragg 12). This is the main difference, because unlike Bragg, I heard these things time and time again.

My religious views are almost a mirror image of Bragg’s. Where I grew up, most kids were brought up Christian, but I wasn’t. I have had no experiences that led me to believe, although I have longed for something, anything. My religious views are of my own constructing as I was never forced upon religion. Where I grew up, most kids were brought up Christian, but I wasn’t. Bragg feels that heaven is not biased, and the way to get in is by doing what is right. “I don’t think you have to do anything to get into heaven except do right” (Bragg 89). I think that people should spend more time to better their own lives, while helping better others lives along the way and less on worshipping God. I believe that there must be a God somewhere though, but he does not control everything. I feel that only I can control my life, by the choices I make. Perhaps he helps put together the situations for me to make the decision, but I need some control. Also, I don’t see him controlling everything, or the horrible things I hear on the news daily wouldn’t happen as often, not to genuinely good people. Bragg recalls a story he had to write about back in his home town. “The destruction of the little country church and the deaths, including the pastor’s four year old daughter, had taken just a second, maybe two. The children had been putting on a play, and in the middle of praising His name, six of the little ones and fourteen grownups were crushed to death” (243). Although I have never had an experience like this, just hearing of things like this are the main reason I have a problem with religion.

My cultural upbringing is very much like Bragg’s. I was raised by my mother without much of a father. Bragg, unlike me, had his brothers with him. Our mothers worked themselves to the bone and hated needing government help. His father, like my father was an alcoholic; however, mine was able to show he cared. Also, my relationship with my father is turning out much better in the end than Bragg and his father ended theirs. What Bragg and I have most in

This is what it’s like to be a Miller in my family. At first, I was only known as the kid from Vegas, as I moved to Savannah at a young age. I was raised by my mother, as my mom and dad got divorced when I was ten I believe. Soon after I moved away from my dad, and my brother moved in with my uncle. I hardly knew him and I only saw him a few times after that. Along with being raised by my mom for the most part of my childhood, my mom felt that religion shouldn’t be forced, but that I should find it on my own as he parents did for her. My culture is very much like Rick Bragg’s in All Over but the Shoutin’, from being raised by our mothers to alcoholic fathers and even our problems with religion.

My mom is like Braggs mom, as she tried her best to make it on her own, but ended up needing government help a month here and there. Bragg’s mom also needed government help. “She signed us up for free lunches. She hated it, but she did it. To not do it, she said would have been “false pride”” (Bragg 73). My mom hated needing help, but she tried not to show her hatred in front of me or my brother. Also, my brother and I were just like Bragg and his brothers, as we were always begging for things she couldn’t afford to buy us. Bragg tells of all the times they went to the store, they never stopped. “Because we were children, we begged for the things we couldn’t have” (75). The worst for my mom was Christmas. She would try to make sure to get us something exceptional, but that meant working overtime. My mom worked at a casino as a janitor, until she lost her job and became a prison guard for the St. Joseph prison. After four years, she found a new job at a factory making car parts. My mom is now going to technical college. Seeing her trying to make a living doing crappy jobs all her life has driven me to go to college as well. Bragg’s mom worked for change just to survive. "My momma just kept trying, just kept pulling” (Bragg 107). Unlike Bragg’s mom, my mom finally has an opportunity to quit working jobs she doesn’t want to do.

My dad is very different from Bragg’s father, perhaps the only similarity being the alcohol abuse. Bragg’s father was not a nice man, and could hold his own in a fight. "When I was six I watched him kick the mortal hell out of a man in a parking lot” (Bragg 7). Most people who know my dad
common is our religious views. We see heaven as a place where the people who did some good for others without expecting anything in return will go after death. Also, our opinions on God are much alike.

Work Cited


Close your eyes and imagine for a second you worked in a daycare center. You watched little children while their parents went to work so that they could have the "Barbie doll dream houses" and the latest actions figures. You know how when nap time rolls around, in reality none of the children actually took naps? How instead of nap time it suddenly becomes let's disobey the teacher and jump-on-our-cots time. When lunch time rolls around, it's so hard to get the children to eat their food? Lunch time turns in to a big food fight, and later on throughout the clay the children are running around screaming their hungry. At daycare writing on the walls is actually normal, children screaming at the top of their lungs and jumping up and down for no apparent reason is what daycare is all about. Well that's how living in my house can be sometimes.

When you enter my three story house you automatically notice the colors of neon orange, cornflower blue, deep pink, forest green, Indian red, sandy brown, peach puff, turquoise and any other color you can think of. Nothing in particular, like a maze that you will never reach the end of, Lines from the top of the walls to the bottom of the walls, lines from one side of the wall to the other side of the wall. In all different colors, shapes, and sizes, the coloring on the walls seems to melt into them as if it was meant to be there, as if my mom purposely painted the lines into the walls for decoration, but no they were put there by my little brother. Toys are everywhere as if my house was a Chucky cheese but it was open 24 hours because it was never clean and organized. You find unthinkable things in my house, things that normally don't belong there. We have fish, we have sea turtles and we have crawl daddies, their meant to be there. But the other things such as snails, bugs, and spiders, were brought in by my little sister because she is nine and I guess that's what nine year olds are suppose to do. Here lives, two small children, two teenagers, and two adults. The house can get out of control, and extremely noisy at times. My brother is the age of two we don't really watch television he is enough entertainment for all of us. He is more entertaining than *Dancing with the Stars, America’s Best Dance Crew*, or even *Family Guy*. He wakes up and just goes, most of the time naked. He goes from watching cartoons for a few minutes to
riding his toy motorcycle back and forth throughout the living room and kitchen. He pretends he is a cowboy and he's chasing another cowboy, for what reason I have no idea. He kind of reminds me of a cub new to the wildlife just inching to explore and learn new things.

In my house you may repeatedly become aware of dints, clinks, and holes in the wall. Those came from years of me and my sisters and brother dashing and smacking into them. Hung over the coloring on the walls, and over the fire place are family pictures, baby pictures, prom pictures, homecoming pictures, volleyball and basketball team pictures, pictures of us seating on Santa Clause's lap, wedding pictures, school pictures from way back in the day were we all had two or three teeth missing. That we look back on now and just laugh at. On the windows hang see through orange curtains, underneath the curtains are blinds in need of some serious dusting. The couch was a brand new, smooth cream color but now it's scribbled on with ink pen and markers done by my little brother. The floor is covered in red kool-aid stains, crumbs, and Lego pieces that should be put away so that the toddler doesn't get a hold of them and put them in his mouth. In the fish tank, the fish swim around the biggest fish "Survivor" chases all the little fish and eat them for dinner instead of eating the fish food that is given to him. In the cabinets you find nothing but junk food, we love how the cream from the "Twinkies" melts in our mouth and the Flaming Hot Cheetos crunch as we throw five or six into our mouths at a time.

At dinner time the smell of pork chops smothered in gravy, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes, and green beans fill the room for Sunday dinner. During the weekdays it's probably Pizza Hut or Chinese takeout. We don't eat at the dinner table like any normal family we're scatter throughout the house like a bad gang when they hear police sirens. Even though my Mom and Dad have four children, they seem to always have extra mouths to feed. We always have an extra person or two at my house on the weekdays or weekends. Our house is considered the "kick it spot" I guess you can think of my house as the hottest concert on a Saturday night. You've got gossiping, yelling, jumping, fighting, and an all around typical girl's night.

On Saturday mornings is like our relax day, this is the day that no one has to work or go to school, so we do our own thing. The whole house is separated. Saturday is the day that our house is actually silent. I love Saturday's in our house I can finally have a peace of mind. You will find my little sister upstairs in her room watching Hanna Montana her eyes stuck to the television like paper sticks to glue. You will find my fifteen year old sister on the computer her face smashed in it like a bully smashing some kids face into a brick wall because he won't give him his lunch money. Instead of doing next week's homework she is on "FaceBook". You will hear my mom every ten minutes yelling "Lil' Chris is stuck in the refrigerator again." Or "Lil' Chris you better stop jumpin' off of the couch." And my step dad will be upstairs in the master bedroom watching the latest movie he order from Netflicks, loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear. My house can get crazy, annoying, confusing, and just plain overwhelming.

In my house on a school night it is considered to be a weekend if you ask me, we still go to sleep when we want to, still walk around and eat junk food all night, still have friends over till were ready for them to go home. I think of it as a college campus, everyone is free to do whatever they want as long as when it's time to get up for school in the morning we do it without my mom hearing any shouting, complaining, or lip smacking. But other than the things I just told you about my house. My family can be just like any other typical family, we love, care, and respect one another and at the end of the day were a big happy family. NOT!
Blake Parker

"Parker, will you go get Mike?"
"Yes sergeant, where does he live?"
"Wathena."
"Is he ready?"

This wasn't the first time he didn't show up for drill. Mike frequently missed or showed up late. His whole persona was failing to conform. Not that it appeared to be on purpose mind you. It just seemed like any standard the army has, he fails to meet. For instance, he once took longer to jog two miles than a soldier who was walking it. His appearance typically slovenly never seemed to improve. Cigarettes burning one right after another, he was 80 plus pounds over the authorized limit. He seemed to always hide when there was work to be done. To make it all even more bothersome he seemed not to care.

Most of the time when someone spoke to Mike it usually wasn't in a positive way. Superiors gave him grief as a matter of habit. As for his peers, they didn't take to him either. Mostly he was the butt of many jokes, and much ridicule. Even though I don't believe it to be in my nature, I too had been guilty of being a jerk to him, all the while a blank stare is all he had to offer in return.

Some months ago while re-qualifying on our rifles Mike was in the lane next to me. His apparent disposition was starting to make me nervous. Just like always, emotionless. The situation made me especially uncomfortable due to the fact his weapon had live rounds in it. Needless to say I couldn't wait to finish my turn.

I spoke with the senior medic, advising him of Mike's trance-like state. The response given by the senior medic did not really help set me at ease. "That's the way he should be, if he changes disposition, then there's something to worry about." He then instructed me to keep an eye on him.

While on the way to his house (which was over thirty minutes away), I started thinking about our return trip. I wondered if he would speak at all. I ultimately concluded he would not be allowed to ride in silence. This was an opportunity to understand him or at least get to know him. No, instead of chewing on him for yet another occurrence of irresponsibility, I was going to pry.

I got to his home where he was outside already and he proceeded to the truck. Like always Mike's hair as well as his mustache were too long. His overall appearance was also the customary un-kempt look. When he got in I gave him a friendly greeting, and we started to the unit. I almost immediately started with the questions I had planned. In a way I guess I kind of interrogated him.

He had been married, and had two children. However, I wasn't prepared for what came next. His oldest child, while still a toddler died from a rare condition. Under the distress his wife left him with the other child not to return. His own grief led him to the bottle, then to drugs. Soon thereafter he lost his job and ran out of money. His drug habit had overtaken him and his money. He then decided to attempt making his own. Not knowing what he was doing and not really caring, he tried some of his concoction. The doctor told him he damaged his brain, maybe permanently.

I think about our ride when at drill weekends and become very ashamed. I had submitted to the meanness that the others had engaged in. I can't imagine what the loss of a child would do to me psychologically. My wife claims she would have to be put in a rubber room. The fact that he functions at all is a testament to his character, which has been degraded by many of his peers. I have now become very protective of him and will not tolerate the insults that I once was guilty of.
When people think of New Orleans they think of spring break, parties, purple and gold parade floats with people covered in makeup from head to toe, and graffiti everywhere. Mardi Gras the festival of feast, the party of a lifetime that only comes once a year. This is not my New Orleans. My New Orleans is the one you never hear about, the one that no one sees because it’s divided by the river. My New Orleans is where gangs and thugs run the streets, where mothers are too scared to let their children go to school because there are no school buses, where no child would dare leave their house alone. The place where if your son or daughter didn’t come home by one o’clock they were doing something they shouldn’t be or they’re in trouble and you may never see them again. This was my New Orleans where I grew up and this is my story. With all the drama and crazies New Orleans holds, it toughened me but I didn’t notice until I was old enough to understand what I wanted in life.

I was born in the 9th wall project where everything was as bad as it could be. In the 9th wall you never look anyone in the face and you keep your head down and mind your own. If you didn’t, people may feel like you are challenging or judging them and they may want to fight you. The only thing you can depend on is your family, but sometimes not even them. In situations where blood should be thicker than water isn’t always the case, addiction wins out sometimes. You could be sold for acid, weed, coke, speed and any other drug. I saw a mother degrading her daughter to fill her own selfish desire. It was getting late one night and my older brother and I were rushing home. We took a short cut through some the buildings to get there faster. It was like running through a tall long brick maze that smelled of beer and urine. I stopped when I heard screaming and crying. That’s when I saw the girl. Her mom had her by the hand pulling and dragging her to one of our known crack houses. The girl was screaming loud and crying. She was yelling, “Please momma let me go please. I don’t want to go mamma. I don’t want to go in there they’ll hurt me momma please don’t make me.” I couldn’t move; I was stunned. The mother just pulled and jerked her, yelling, “Shut up and come on”. My older brother and I just stood there amazed that a mother would do this to her own child. I couldn’t believe it. I don’t know if I felt bad for the girl or if it was because I just stood there but I felt my heart breaking. I fell to the ground crying for the girl. Until this, I thought all families were in a way close and protected each other. I knew some families had problems like mine but this was different. I never saw anything like this. My brother just picked me up off the ground and carried me home. He was humming one of my favorite hymns “swing low sweet chariot”. That song always made me feel better. He told me as he carried me home not to worry for that girl and that god will take care of everything. We never saw the little girl again. We hear that she moved to Mississippi after we didn’t see her for a while, but we all really didn’t know. I learned very fast that in the projects you grow up fast. There’s no time for a childhood. You grow up fast to save yourself in order to make it out of the jungle alive or become part of the problem and sometimes that was the only way to survive. Most of the time some of us didn’t have the choice to leave.

Growing up poor in New Orleans and around such madness wasn’t easy. The school district wasn’t much better. Going to an elementary school where the metal detectors were the new thing in school, the books were older than your parents, and the only thing your teacher cared about was getting their next pay check and getting out of there was hard. Going to a school where even your teachers had given up, shows that you might as well have no future. One day I was sitting in my second grade class and one of the students went to turn in his homework a day late. He tried to tell the teacher he left it in his mom’s car. We don’t have buses in New Orleans; you either walk or you get a ride. Ms. Leach didn’t want to hear it. She balled the paper up and threw it at the boy. She told him, “Don’t give me your excuses and I really don’t care next time turn it in on time”. It turns out that the boy wasn’t lying. His mom came up the next day to explain to the teacher what happened. She still didn’t give him credit for it. Walking to school was no better than walking on something that doesn’t even count as a side walk. If you call broken pieces of concrete a sidewalk that if you tripped you could brutally hurt yourself and end up in the hospital. The city never fixed anything. All they cared about was the French Quarter. They didn’t care what happened to our side of town, all we could do was move forward.

Even though New Orleans is full of gangsters and thugs and crazed people who beat on each other’s doors with knives and where just walking down the street could put you in the emergency room, it shaped me for the better. New Orleans showed me not to take anything for granted and to have respect for everyone, “treat people good and they will treat you good” as my mom always said. Growing up we didn’t have much. We were happy just getting hand-me downs. When Christmas came around we were excited about whatever we got because my mom saved what she could all
Year to get us something. One year my mom told us on New Years that she was going to get us something special but we couldn’t tell my step dad because he liked to sell our things for crack. On that Christmas, we woke up and we each had three presents. I had a new Barbie, play dough and a Mr. Potato Head. We were all so excited about what we got but was this the something special she told us she was getting? The next day after my step dad left, my mom let us stay home from school to give us our special gifts. We went out back in what was kind of an old beat up rusty shed and closed our eyes. We opened up our eyes to see brand new bikes, each one of them in each of our favorite colors. We were so excited about the new bikes. We spent all day on them till it was almost time for my step dad to come home. My mom told us if he saw them say we got them from my grandma. We listened. It was the best Christmas any one of us could remember. We never got presents this big again but the memory made it all worth it. If it wasn’t much we knew somewhere else someone else had worse then what we had, some had nothing. I learned to put my needs before my wants and that makes it easier for me to make decisions. I think it makes me have better judgment of what is needed and what’s important. I learned that I didn’t need material items such as cable, designer clothing, and jewelry because all we really need is family. Family is the only thing in this world worth anything that you don’t have to pay a dime for. I hear people say “I can’t live without my phone” all the time and I just laugh because they don’t realize what’s important in this world and it’s not their phone.

New Orleans has also made me the person I am today. It helped me realize what I wanted for me and my future family. It made me realize that I didn’t want to be that person digging through trash or living in the project. Living in a broken home or with an abusive husband who doesn’t love me and rather drink all day than be with his family was not how I wanted to live. I am working hard through school so my future family and I won’t have to go through that. I want a life better than what my parents gave me. My step dad was a crack addict. We all knew (me and my siblings) but my mom tried to hide it from us but it was obvious. We all knew when he came home because it always started with swearing and ended with my mom screaming. My older brother and sister did everything they could to help and I called the police. After I called the police, I shielded my younger brother from the madness going on in the house. I didn’t want him to have those horrible memories in his head for the rest of his life. I couldn’t let that happen. I talked to him and did whatever I could, hoping that he wouldn’t share our burden. I can’t and won’t let my brother go through that. I’m going to be the example and show that’s not what life’s all about, that we can have something better. I want to show him that we control our destiny not where we come from.

New Orleans has also helped me realized what I wanted to do with my life. I want to teach because some of the teachers I had growing were horrible. They didn’t care for their students only about their pay checks. They didn’t want you to ask them questions they just gave you an assignment and told you to do it. My third grade teacher told me once that whoever was helping me with my homework was stupid and didn’t know what they were doing. The teachers looked down on us like we were nothing, like we weren’t worth the sweat on their back. They pretty much told us in no words that we weren’t worth anything that we aren’t going anywhere in life so why try. One day in class my teacher Miss Webb was yelling at a student about day dreaming in her class. I couldn’t take her being so rude and I finally stood up in said, “What gives you the right to tell us that we have nothing. Only people who pick on people that are smaller than them are the bad guys. You’re ugly because you’re mean and you don’t care about others feelings. Only god can tell people were there going in life not ugly people”. That little outburst landed me three weeks of detention and a call home. Once I explained to my mom why I said it, she wasn’t mad any more she was happier that I stood up for myself but that was also the same teacher that kept me back a grade. I don’t want children or anyone else to feel the way that teacher made my classmates and me feel. I want kids to realize that their dreams come true if they try anything is possible.

New Orleans has taught me a lot of things. It’s taught me how to tell what’s important and how to survive. It showed me that things aren’t always handed to you and that life is hard and education is the only way to make life easier and even though we have to push through walls that are blocking our way to get what we want, we just can’t stop running when life gets hard; we have to keep going and get to the end because only then will you feel successful, accomplished and happy. Where you come from doesn’t mean anything; it’s what you make of it that counts.
Patience is a Piece of Cake
Miranda Stafford

On my sixth birthday my mom bought a bubble gum machine shaped cake pan. This is the first birthday cake I can remember. Even though decorating that cake was like using stencils she still took her time with it and was very patient. If she made a mistake she would just scrape off the frosting in that area and try again. As a child I would glance at my mom’s progress continually until the cake had been set on the table with candles in it. As a child I was baffled at the fact she could do this, the finished cake looked as good as the cakes seen in bakeries and in the grocery stores. It looked like a real gumball machine when it was completed. The older I got the more I wanted to be an artist like my mom and to have the patience to make something so beautiful and have everyone admire it.

When my daughter, Haven’s, first birthday came around I knew that no store bought cake was going to be good enough. Since I didn’t have any specially shaped cake pans of my own, I had to improvise. My boyfriend, Scott, said that he wasn’t going to waste money on a cake pan shaped like something until he knew for sure I could decorate a regular shaped cake with more than just white icing. So I did just that.

Before I could prove to Scott that I could make an elaborate cake design I had to figure out what that design was going to be. So about a week before Haven’s birthday I was watching a cartoon on T.V. and during one of the commercials a couple of kids came on and started to talk about how kids could make their very own cake designs. The kids on T.V. demonstrated how you, at home, could make shapes and stand them on their sides before icing them. So I took that idea and grabbed a piece of paper, drew a rectangle on it and imagined it was a cake. I drew lines through the rectangle and pieced them together in my head. Finally I had the perfect design in mind.

The day of Haven’s birthday party, with my idea in mind, I got started. First I baked a cake in a 9x13 inch rectangular cake pan. I took the cake out of the regular shaped pan and cut it into pieces, one rectangle piece off of the end, two small triangles and two big triangles. When Scott saw what I had done he thought I had mutilated a perfectly good cake. I covered an old pizza box with foil and began to arrange the cake pieces on it to resemble a butterfly. I colored the under layer of icing yellow and started making designs on it. I used the star tip of my tube of icing and also made designs and square designs on the cake to resemble the markings and coloring of butterfly’s wings. I used almost every color of the rainbow. With yellows, blues, pinks and greens as wing designs and decorative sprinkles over the whole thing. When I was finished Scott was amazed to see that it actually looked like a butterfly. Everyone at the party that saw it that day was amazed. Our family and friends all took pictures of it and congratulated me on the detail and precision. I felt such pride. I had finally become an artist like my mom is. My daughter was too little to appreciate it at the time, but now she looks at the pictures my family and I took and her eyes light up.

For my other daughter, Hannah’s, birthday I made another homemade cake and this time I had purchased a cake pan of my own ahead of time. Scott was so impressed with the butterfly cake that day that he told me he would buy whichever character cake pan I wanted for future birthdays. I picked out a Dora the Explorer pan. Hannah was really into Dora at the time so I figured there was a good chance she would like it. I was so excited when I turned the pan over, picked it up and the cake really looked like Dora. As I began icing the cake a feeling of nostalgia washed over me. I could remember my mom taking the time to make our birthday cakes like it was yesterday the precision, detail, and patience it took. Until that moment I had never fully understood the patience required to make a cake with so much detail. Again Scott peeked over my shoulder and commented on the fact that it didn’t look like it was suppose to. “Patience is a virtue,” I replied without even glancing at him. I shoed him out of the kitchen every time he came back in until I was finished. He looked at the finished product and congratulated me on how good it looked. I have used that cake pan many times now for my daughters and nieces birthdays.

Decorating cakes is like yoga for me. I get a work out and at the same time the work relaxes me. First I create a relaxing atmosphere. That is not easy in my house. I usually get Scott to take the kids out for a while the day of a party or sometimes I can get them down for a nap. Its not that it’s incredibly difficult making a cake with children underfoot but I really love to surprise them with the finished product. Once I have the house to myself, I stretch and prepare for a long, intense, concentrated cake-decorating workout. I turn on the radio, listen to my favorite music and get busy. By the time the cake is decorated every muscle in me aches from bending and contorting in odd directions and I feel as if I have been dragged through a keyhole. All my muscles ache and I can hardly stand up straight.

I’m sure my mom felt the same way after she finished a cake. She didn’t show her exhaustion and I try not to act to worn out either. Because as soon as I see my child’s
face as they look at their cake for the first time, beaming with excitement, it all seems worth it. When I see that I don’t feel as beat anymore. A feeling of relaxation covers your aching muscles and you feel the excitement in the air again.

Over the years I have acquired several more cake pans including a 3-D Pooh Bear pan I purchased off the Internet. I’ve found that decorating a 3-D cake takes even more patience than a regular cake because it sits up and has more surface area and is more time consuming. I do not plan on selling my collection of cake pans at any time. I hope to pass them on to my children so they can see for themselves the look on their children’s faces and feel what I feel now and what I’m sure my mom felt when I was little. To have pride in something that they may, or may not have thought significant as a child. To know the patience required, and the feeling that you get from seeing their eyes light up and hearing them say, “Mom, that’s the coolest.”

Happy Birthday!

When most people think of school, they often think reading, writing, and arithmetic. For others, school means warmth, food, stability, structure, and a sense of belonging, and a feeling of safety. Still others think of that special teacher who believed in them and embodied one or more of the attributes above. I had that special teacher growing up who provided me with a feeling of guidance and support. In The Glass Castle, Jeanette Walls had Miss Bivens, the Wave’s faculty adviser for the school newspaper. In “The Sanctuary of School” Lynda Barry had Mrs. Claire LeSane, her second grade teacher. That significant person for me was Coach Steve Lucito, my 7th grade study hall teacher. These three teachers were more than educators; they were our security and they were our life support.

These special teachers became good role models for us, and with the help of good role models, school becomes a safe place where we discover who we are and what we are called to be. Jeanette Walls, in The Glass Castle, found her special role model. She writes: “That year I started working for the school newspaper, The Maroon Wave, I wanted to join some club or group organization where I could feel I belonged, where people wouldn’t move away if I sat down next to them” (203). By Miss Bivens allowing her to work on the school newspaper, Miss Bivens became that special teacher. In “The Sanctuary of School,” Barry found her remarkable teacher when she said: “I was with my teacher, and in a while I was going to sit at my desk, with my crayons and pencils and books and classmates all around me, and for the next six hours I was going to enjoy a thoroughly secure, warm and stable world” (192). That inspiring woman for Barry was Mrs. Claire LeSane. Mrs. LeSane provided Barry with the feeling of security from her troubled home life.

Coach Lucito was my “Bivens” and “LeSane.” He provided me with a feeling of acceptance and direction in life. He was the boys’ gym and track coach and my study hall teacher. I would have to stay after school waiting on my brother to finish football practice so I could get a ride home. Our family didn’t live in the district where we went to school; we had special transfer privileges to attend our high school. Consequently, we were expected to provide our own transportation. During the interim of waiting around many
hours for my brother to finish practice, Couch Lucito had compassion for me and made me feel needed by asking me to help with boys track. Through my efforts and his encouragement, I eventually became the track manager. It was a great honor for me to become the track manager, as I was only in the 7th grade and a transfer student. I will never forget his positive influence in my life.

While these teachers were doing their jobs, they provided us with help in ways they didn’t even know. This was my first year attending a new school without a family member or friends. I was scared to go to a new school without having anyone there. I didn’t know if I would fit into this school. Coach Lucito was able to provide me with the feeling of acceptance and to put my fear at ease. The time I spent in study hall and after school with Coach Lucito was a time that made a difference in my life. He helped me with my school work, and he told me I had to make good grades in order to retain my status on the track team. I enjoyed helping him with track, as it gave me the opportunity to travel with the team to the meets. That fact gave me the incentive to do my best. He became like an older brother to me. It was nice to have someone like him in “my corner.” Miss Bivens, in The Glass Castle, told Jeanette Walls she would fight for her as long as she kept clean. She, like Coach Lucito, was in “her corner” too. These teachers provided us with guidance and self worth; they were able to see in us the potential that we couldn’t even see in ourselves.

These influential people also had ways to bring comfort in time of need. In “The Sanctuary of School,” LeSane believed in the natural healing power of painting and drawing for troubled children. By allowing Lynda Barry to paint in the back of the room she provided safety and a feeling of comfort that the girl needed at that time in her life. One of the comforting times that Jeanette Walls found in The Glass Castle was when she noted: “On winter evenings, instead of huddling around the stove at 93 little Hobart Street, I’d go down to the warm dry offices of The Welch Daily News, where The Maroon Wave was typeset, laid out and printed” (203). By being able to go to these offices, she found happiness in being warm and dry. I found my comfort in helping out with the track meets and practices after school. It provided me with a safe place to stay: without it I would have spends many hours alone.

By joining these extra organizations it help us to make friends. I was new and did not know anyone; the other kids that started 7th grade already had friends as they attended the same grade school – they had their own little clicks that hung out together. By helping out, I was able to make friends with the boys on the track team. The girls in my classes started to talk to me more; they wanted to know about the boys on the team. I could relate to Jeanette Walls in The Glass Castle as she experienced the difference in her classmates after she interviewed Chuck Yeager for the school newspaper. They all started to talk and treat her like she was one of them. These teachers provided us with the chance to experience that feeling of belonging. They went the “extra mile” to help and encourage us to get involved.

These three teachers were not just our educators in school; they were our security from the troubles we held in life. They were our life support. Lynda Barry expresses her feeling of security in “The Sanctuary of School” when she states, “And I saw my teacher, Mrs. Claire LeSane, walking toward us in a red coat and calling my name in a very happy and surprised way, and suddenly my throat got tight and my eyes stung and I ran toward her crying. It was something that surprised us both. It’s only thinking about it now, 28 years later, that I realize I was crying from relief” (192). For me, my security came when I was helping Lucito with the track team. I knew that I was helping someone who cared about my self-worth. This made me look forward to going to school each day. He like Miss Bivens, and Mrs. LeSane provided us with the life support we needed.

Works Cited


Maslow's Hierarchy provides an outline of some important issues that must be addressed if human beings are to achieve the levels of character and competencies necessary to be successful. There are two groupings with Maslow's Hierarchy; deficiency needs and growth needs. Within the deficiency needs, each lower need must be met before moving to the next level. Meaning if a person doesn't have their physiological needs, safety needs, and the belongingness and love needs they aren't able to proceed with the next branch of the pyramid. According to Maslow "This body of research can be very important to parents, educators, and administrators with developing and using human potential." Walls, Barry, and Jordan all succeeded despite the adversity they faced.

In The Glass Castle, Jeanette Walls state of living is unimaginable. Her parents live under degrading circumstances because it is ok to them, but never consider the children when they choose to live the way they do. In "The Sanctuary of School" also details a situation similar to Walls. In "The Sanctuary of School," Lynda Barry talks about how she felt the only place she is safe is at school which she defined as her sanctuary. In "Becoming Educated", in her early years Jordan missed a lot of the essential points in education. Jordan thought in order for her to succeed she would have to work harder and study harder. At times in class, Jordan didn't understand the concepts; the words, the ideas, and the process of what was being taught. One would think that for Jordan to have made it to Boston University she must have been on top her game throughout her earlier years in school but she wasn't. Jordan not only dealt with poverty, filthy living arrangements, and gangs that lured her neighborhood but also dealt with some of the most absurd circumstances.

If Barry, Walls, and Jordan followed Maslow's Hierarchy it would be assumed that in order for them to move to the next level their physiological needs and safety needs must be met. However, Barry, Walls, and Jordan manage to overcome their issues in similar but different ways.

According to Barry, "in an overcrowded and unhappy home, it's incredibly easy for any child to slip away. The high level of frustration, depression, and anger in my house made my brothers and me invisible" (192). One might think this situation could be better if maybe the family was on just a strict tight budget instead of added chaos being involved. Barry understands the unfairness of her situation and sees it for exactly what it is. It's sad to see a child not getting the attention they deserve and what is even more heartbreaking is that not all schools, like Barry's protect children. There are plenty of schools telling the neglected children they need to fend for themselves and that their situation is just "unlucky." Barry states "the only place we could count on being noticed was school" (192). - Sad but at the same time a sigh of relief. The school to the children is almost like their hope for a better tomorrow. Barry describes seeing her teacher "And I saw my teacher, Mrs. Clair Lesane, walking toward us in a red coat and calling my name in a very happy and surprised way, and suddenly my throat got tight and my eyes stung and I ran toward her crying" (192). Barry trusted Mrs. Lesane and knew that while she was in her classroom she was safe from her unpredictable chaotic life at home.

Compared to Barry, Walls wasn't as lucky to have someone such as the janitor in her school, or the secretary, or her teacher for that matter. Walls had herself and siblings, but if each one of them were going through the same thing it's harder for them to provide a positive outlook for one another. Jeanette Walls is too smart for her own good. Despite her living situations, her appearance, and parents, she manages to understand the importance for her to get an education. Walls takes up journalism. She is completely fond of journalism and when she shares her idea about going to college in New York her counselor respond by not encouraging her to pursue her dreams but instead advises her to settle for less and go to a nearby community college and live in Welch. "That would be a terrible mistake. You live here now. Think of what you'd miss. Your family and friends. And senior year is the highlight of your entire high school experience. You'd miss senior day. You'd miss senior prom" (235). She expected nothing more for Jeanette than what she got for herself. How troubling is the fact that the educators aren't advising the kids better for them or encouraging them to pursue their dreams of succeeding. Walls thought about what her counselor was advising her to do and figured that it was not a compelling reason to stay on in Welch for one more year.

Although Walls and Barry's situations are very misfortunate at least both of them were able to continue to get an education or apply themselves to other extracurricular activities to keep them involved with school. Walls being involved with the school newspaper and Barry with Mrs. Lesane's drawing/paintings in the back of her classroom. They found away to reach out of their own situations. Unfortunately for Barbara Jordan it wasn't until college that she actually felt like she was getting an education. "Finally I felt I was really learning new things, really going to school. I
felt that I was getting educated, whatever that was” (213). Jordan hadn't had the proper education because clearly where she grew up at there were bigger issues that prevented her from getting a descent education. Jordan dealt with growing up in a rural neighborhood where troubling times came more often than not and with no one setting an example of what she should become. Jordan took it upon herself to succeed just as Walls and Berry.

All of these women suffered from a great deal of turmoil and have something in common. Walls not having proper living arrangements or parents that lacked responsibility, Barry living under a chaotic roof in which the only people to acknowledge her were the administrators at her school, and Jordan who felt she had been deprived from a real education, that is until she got to college due to her chaotic and rural neighborhood. These three females contradicted Maslow's Hierarchy. Each under his theory never would have made it to the next level within the pyramid without completing the first and second. They all succeeded despite their own personal situations.

Researchers have told society that the education system has changed for the better but what society doesn’t know it really has changed for the worse. In Jonathan Kozol’s Savage Inequalities, he describes in his book how inner city schools don’t have textbooks or how teachers just accept the fact when kids stop showing up. He also shows the complete opposite where suburban schools have lawyers and doctors as their teachers and have the best textbooks money can buy. Kozol exposes the truth on where the money is going and how suburban school’s funds are so big, and that the students are twice as likely to go to college and do something big with those degrees. While inner city schools wait to get money they’re promised or needed, and they see students drop out and never come back and there twice as likely never to get a high school diploma and to end up in prison. How can our government see this happening and do nothing to help these schools that are so deeply in trouble and need help. My first five years of school I went to a private catholic school and the other eight years I was in an inner city school and even though it was never as horrible as Kozol’s book, I did see with my own eyes the trouble we had in our school Abraham Lincoln High School but some important people in our neighborhood decided to change it. We can no longer let inner city kids disappear into thin air because if it continues to happen, how many more kids will we lose before someone steps up to change it.

It is a fact that if a kid doesn't feel safe during school, it's likely they won't be able to retain the knowledge they need for school. Violence is not only in the school but it leaks into the community as well. Kozol observes as kids were walking with him in East St.Louis, “Smokey says his sister was raped and murdered and then dumped behind his school.” Another kid pipes up and says, “Smokey’s sister was 11 years old” (Kozol 13). How can children survive this kind of trauma when they see it all the time? Will those children be able to understand that other kids their age are riding their bikes and playing with chalk? This is inexcusable to have children have to bear with this kind of violence taking over their community. New York City’s inner city schools have taken an approach to help the violence in the school system. “Two years ago, in order to meet this and other problems,
New York City’s office of school safety started buying handcuffs. Some 2,300 pairs were purchased for a system that contains almost 1,000 schools” (Kozol 118). This makes no sense that they see to use money for handcuffs instead of buying textbooks or desks. How is a kid supposed to react to getting handcuffed and put into the back of a paddy wagon? Doesn’t this just show kids that we care more about violence and to solve it with handcuffs, instead of school, books or even graduating? While at my high school the increase of danger erupting from four major gangs and their high presence in our school and in our neighborhood the school decided to take action. To solve the problem and watch for the students who were part of these gangs they decided that we could no longer wear a full outfit of these solid colors: red, green, black or white. This grew to be an annoyance to us kids who weren’t affiliated with these gangs and we had to suffer the consequences for it. During my last semester of high school, we had so many bomb threats left in the boy’s bathroom they started to make changes there as well. During the school day, we would have to get a pass from our teacher to leave class to go use the restroom and once you were there you would sign in with a teacher at the bathroom. Since the bomb threats were in the boy’s restroom, they had a teacher go in with them. Once we were done, we would sign out with that teacher and they would sign our pass so we could go back to class. During my last semester, I had to deal with this ordeal and keep my patience while the administration was trying to find the person who was doing this. At the same time every day I didn’t know if I would ever see my family again or even see my high school diploma. At graduation I hugged that diploma tightly and knew I had made it to see it again or even see my high school diploma. At graduation I would ever see my family again or even see my high school diploma.

Students also can’t value education because most teachers don’t care what happens to their students in there classrooms. If teachers don’t show that they care about their student’s education, how can a student go to that class and work hard when they don’t see the teacher giving any effort. Kozol observes, “We came upon two teachers watching a soap opera on T.V.” (69). This gives us more evidence that some teachers just honestly don’t care about their job. They just show up so they can get paid. Even though in a lot of cases in Kozol’s book the teachers don’t care, in some cases the one individual can make all the difference to the students in their classrooms. A first year English teacher from Du Sable High School said, “If I began with 20 students in a class, I’d have lots more time to spend with each of them” (Kozol 111). I wish more teachers were that caring and want to help you move on to bigger and better places. In my high school I had more than a share of bad teachers that only gave us “Busy work,” so the principal and the vice-principals don’t get suspicious of them. My French teacher would actually let us watch movies in English during the class and if we had an “A” during finals we took a fake final just so it looked liked we took a final in her class. I honestly don’t understand how someone can go to sleep at night knowing they’re ruining their student’s chance of becoming something better than that classroom. One person that taught me that having passion in yourself and not letting anyone put you down is a special person in my heart who wasn’t a teacher, but he was my principal: Mr. Al Grazino. No matter what was stressing him out, he would always be there by the front doors greeting everyone with a “Good morning,” and sometimes would stop a student just to talk to them specifically, often it was us seniors to make sure we were on track to graduate. He also would attend every game for every sport from football all the way to softball. Whether it was a home game or a three- hour drive, he would always be sitting in the stands. He also always had an open door policy, and was always willing to talk to you about your successes or if you needed help. Mr. Grazino was also the pushing force to remodel our school and to start getting new updates on equipment to sports and school. If Grazino weren’t at our school I wouldn’t know where I would be or even our school. So having good, caring teachers, administrators is important for the success of a student and how they carrying themselves for the rest of their life.

The condition of a school is important to a student’s eyes because if it’s dirty and falling apart how are they able to learn all the knowledge they need to learn. No matter if you are entering in kindergarten or a senior if your learning environment isn’t a place where you can focus, how are you supposed to reach your full potential? Kozol acknowledge an East St. Louis locker room, “See, this ceiling in danger of collapsing. See, this room don’t have any heat in winter. But we got to come here anyway. We wear our coats while working out” (26). How can that football team even work out in that condition of having no heat and they’re trying to work? In Rye High School, they have a better environment to attend, study and to excel in their school. “In a student lounge, a dozen seniors are relaxing on a carpeted floor that is constructed with a numbers of tiers so that, as the principal explain, they can stretch out and be comfortable while reading” (Kozol 125). It’s awesome that these students can have a place to relax but at the same time some kids don’t have desks or textbooks. I honestly don’t understand how that’s equal how someone doesn’t have desk but someone can have a student lounge. My school saw great improvements during our remodel of our school. We got a new band room, commons, cafeteria and remodel of classrooms. I feel so grateful to have been able to use those new resources but during the construction the gas lines got cut and we went without heat for three days. We had to wear our coats inside and also could see our breaths in are classrooms. It was
difficult to play our instruments in band or even to concentrate in class. For three days I really appreciated what we did have before construction and not complain so much about it because I knew some kids weren’t as lucky.

After finishing reading Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, I now realize his purpose to seek and expose the truth on how unequal the inner schools are to suburban schools. Our educational system needs to see the problems that affect the inner city school system and make some major improvements. If the educational system doesn’t improve, it we will see the dropout rates increase and the prison population as well. Can we really risk the future of younger generation to come? I wonder if anybody has realized when a kid drops out they could of achieved big dreams and became a doctor, teacher, lawyer or even our next president. When you think of these possibilities, can we still sit by and do nothing. I know I want my unborn kids to have the best education they can have because if I don’t dream big for my unborn children to have that education this country will miss out on the possibilities my kids could give them.

Works Cited


In today's society reading and writing are no longer on people's priority list. But when you lose the value of reading and writing, you really lose a journey of exploring all the wonders of books and expressing your true passion of writing. Through the journey of reading and writing you find yourself in a world of fairy tales, romance and vampires. In the essay, "One Writers Beginnings," by Eudora Welty, she believed that, "I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them" (182). Also in "The Love of Books," by Gloria Naylor, she questions, "Why do I write? The truth, the unvarnished truth, is that I haven’t a clue" (225). Their passion of reading and writing has really shown me my true passion of reading and writing. Reading and writing are a way to journey through life and discover your path through these adventures. For Welty, Naylor and myself, books reading and writing opened a journey of a lifetime of enjoying reading and self-expression through writing.

During our childhood a lot of parent's spend time teaching us how to read and helping us to write, and to expand our imaginations. In Welty’s life no matter where she was, "I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to" (182). The passion Welty felt in her early age was all to her parents reading to her and struggling to save money so they could purchase books for her. Welty was able to journey through her love of books from the support of her parent's when back in the 1900's it wasn't really a trend to have parents, especially with girl’s to try to give them opportunities to enjoy reading and writing. As a child I can vividly remember my parent’s always reading to me during the day and at bedtime. My favorite childhood books were, "Are You my Mother," "How I Much I Love You," and "Go dog go." I've never forgot the memories of sitting either with my mom or my dad and them slowly but surely teaching me how to read and expanding my world of books. Now as a young adult, I have continually enjoyed reading exploring all that it has to offer. I’ve mostly enjoyed fiction books; I really enjoy picturing the stories in my head to travel a journey throughout a book. Reading has always been a hobby of mine but it also calms me during tense and stressful event. These books that have been apart of my life have given me help
through my journey and have helped me to explore the world from my comfortable home in Iowa. Welty and I had similar experiences of books and continually had passion for them into your adulthoods. Though Welty and I lived in different times but at the end of the day a passion for reading never alters from the past or the present.

In a child's life writing can be difficult task to accomplish, but with the right tools you might succeed. In Naylor's she questioned, "Why do I write" (225)? Naylor believes anyone can be a writer if they can unlock their box of human creativity. She got her passion from her mother to pursue writing and reading to her best of her abilities. Naylor then stepped into an unlocked cage of all the books in the world. "Because we grew up without much money and a whole lot of dreams, we spent a great deal of time in the public libraries" (Naylor 227). She lived to sit in a room at the New York public libraries to open books and keep them for two weeks. As Naylor grew up she had a bad case of shyness but with the help from her mother she started a diary. Her mother left it for in her room, "I picked up the diary and I did just that, I proceeded to write down all the things that I could not say"(Naylor 228). In some ways I'm similar to Naylor and in others not. I do remember the day we went into the public library and my dad held my hand and carried my sister when we walked in. At age five this big building scared me with the assurance of my dad I stepped in and we walked up to the counter. Since I was only five my dad filled out all the information for me and signed my name. Then the nice lady showed me the kids corner and my sister and I headed over there and quickly started to find books. When we each found four books each we went up to checkout. Once again my dad took my hand and carried my sister and headed out of a place that I would end still have the same library card and spend a lot of time there. Writing has always been a struggle for me since as a child with all the rules and you never know if someone understands your writing style. I've always eased through English and never cared and none of my English teachers pushed me to excel. Until I stepped into English 100 was when I really started to push myself and really started to notice that I could be a good writer. I was so excited on my task three paper when my professor Terrick left a comment of, "You really should put this in the publication." Me? I never saw myself as a good writer into I stepped into college. I'm glad I've found out something new about myself that turned out to be a great positive.

Throughout your journey of life sometimes you need to look back and thank the people in your life that guided you to reading and writing. Both Naylor and Welty both have said there parents were there inspiration. Naylor has said throughout her story, "I elect to trace the untraceable, my passionate love of books and my affair with the written world, back to my mother, who was also an avid lover of books"(226). Naylor saw the passion in her mother eyes of working more hours as a child to save up enough money to buy reading material. I think Naylor and her mother both show true passion towards reading and writing.

Welty had both parents giving her support and allowing her all the reading material they could get their hands on. "To both my parents I owe my early acquaintance with a beloved Mark Twain"(Welty 183). Welty since a young age always had a love for books and she it owes it all to her parents making sure the books she read would help her in the future. Welty parents were also avid readers and allowing those books to let them travel the world and anywhere else they wanted to travel in a book. Though Welty’s parents weren't rich they saved money so they could buy all of them reading materials. I think Welty’s parents were very smart to allow their daughter access to books. I truly owe my passion of reading to my parents. They helped me as a young child to learn how to read, to get a library card and really allow me to explore every nook and crannies of the world of books. As a young adult now I still continually love to read new books or reread books I still have in my own bookcase. My parents have always supported my hobby of reading and trying to get my hands all over any books that have caught my eye. They would get me books for any occasion or getting me gift cards for bookstores so I can pick them out. I really thank my parents for showing me how great it is to pick up a book. I also think if Naylor and Welty were here they would also do the same thing because the three of connect the strongest because of are passion of reading and writing and getting the opportunity to journey with these great passions of reading and writing.

Reading and writing are truly a journey throughout someone's life and you are really missing out on this greatness that it can bring to someone. Reading has truly can open your eyes to all adventures that offers to you. I think this year of English 100 has opened my eyes that I do have great talent for writing and it's just been waiting for me to unlock like it happened to Naylor. Welty helped me to remember forgotten memories of my childhood and how I truly started to read. With reading and writing apart my life, like it was my imagination cam from or when I started to write with more passion. I hope the journey of reading and writing comes full circle when I see my child pick up a magical fairy tale book.
You have a different education experience than the person sitting next to you. My educational experience was different than what we read in Savage Inequalities by Jonathan Kozol. Kozol's talks about how high schools do not have enough textbooks, good teachers, and lack of classrooms. My high school that I graduated from was known as the "spoiled" high school in the area. Most of the kids that go to Knob Noster High School are military children. So, therefore, the government gives money to that school to help support the school. My high school had a lot of money and used it wisely. I do not know what it is like to grow up in a poor school or area like Kozol explains in his book.

All teachers in every school should be there for the students and not themselves. Kozol reports, "He [a 16-year-old student] asked his teacher if he could come in for extra help, but she informed him that she didn't have the time. He asked if he could come to school an hour early, when she might have time to help him, but security precautions at the school made this impossible" (110). This statement shows how much the teachers in the South Bronx really cared about their students. Those teachers will not even give their students any of their extra time to help them with their studies. These actions from the teachers make the children that they do not care about their education and it is unfair for the students. However, in my school all the teachers encourage the extra help and time. We had homework club after school every day for those students who needed extra help in their studies. On the other hand, in East St. Louis Kozol observes the teachers, "Before I leave the school, I take a final stroll along the halls. In a number of classrooms, groups of children seem to be involved in doing nothing. Sometimes there's a teacher present, doing something at his desk. Sometimes there's no adult in the room" (33). I was shocked when I read this. I do not even remember a time in my years of schooling that I did not have a teacher or adult present in the room. That was a bad thing to do at the elementary schools, is to leave a class unattended. If you leave a classroom full of students alone then the students will cause trouble and will not learn anything. Then they feel like they are not important and can do anything they want. That is one reason the poorer schools have trouble with their students learning anything. I believe that it is unfair to those students who are in a poorer educational system to grow up in a school that does not give you a chance to grow and learn. I had everything I needed to learn; however, I took everything for granted. That is not fair for those students in a poorer school.

In every school you need the resources to get a good education. Kozol writes about the resources the students in the South Bronx have. "I've got five classes – 42 in each! We have no textbooks yet. I'm using my old textbooks from the seventh grade" (111). In East St. Louis he comments about their textbooks "A history teacher at the Martin Luther King School has 110 students in four classes – but only 26 books. Some of the books are missing the first hundred pages" (37). These are more examples from the book that show how these students are not getting the education that they need. The students are not to blame for why they cannot learn. The teachers and the government need to look at how they are expected to learn when they do not have anything to use. In my high school, we had all the updated books and resources we needed. My senior year the school gave each student a laptop to use and to bring home to work on homework. Our laptops had all the updated programs that we needed. All the laptops had programs on them that had all the same information as our textbooks, so therefore we had some of our textbooks on our laptops. However, the teachers gave us the textbooks too, in case the laptops crashed. I have been blessed to go to a great high school with all the resources that I needed. I cannot imagine going to one of these schools and not having the resources I needed to get an education. If I did not have the resources that I needed in high school, then how does my high school expect me to go to college and then get a job? I could not imagine my world without an education.

Every student needs a good environment to be able to learn. In East St. Louis, a teacher explains the classrooms, "Certain classrooms are so cold in winter that the students have to wear their coats to class, while children in other classrooms suffer in a suffocating heat that cannot be turned down" (37). In Brooklyn the principal summarizes their school "...bathrooms, gymnasiums, hallways and closets" (114). Then the principal claims, "We have no closets now – they're classrooms now" (114). While in my high school we had classrooms that were heated in the winter and cool in the summer. In each classroom, we had actual closets. When I read this about how the closets were used for classrooms I was speechless. I could not imagine learning math in a closet and trying to fit everyone in the closet. I could not learn anything at all if I did not have a good environment to be able to learn. No wonder these students could not pay attention.

My high school was better than the ones that Kozol describes in his book. However, it was not like the school in Rye. Kozol describes it, "Built of handsome gray stone and
set in a landscaped campus, it resembles a New England prep school.” We did not have student lounges that those students had; however, we did have a lobby where a lot of the students liked to hang out before and after school. Rye High School got private charitable funds even though it was a public school; we were a public school. In Rye they had 92 of the 140 seniors enrolled in AP classes. In Knob it was not like that at all, we had maybe 10 of the 80 seniors in AP classes. Our school was not as bad as the ones in Chicago, New York, or in East St. Louis. However, our school was not as nice as Rye High School. My high school was more in the middle of all of these schools.

Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* explanations made me realize how lucky I was to be able to learn in a good high school. After I read this book, I realize that I took my high school for granted. I think we should make all schools the same for everywhere by giving each school the same amount of money and resources. The principal from East St. Louis High says he would buy new books, update the science labs, redo the classrooms, and etc. if he had an extra $20 million. Not one school should have something that another school does not have. However, I know that this is easier to say than to do. I know it will take a while or if it ever happens a while for all schools to be equal or similar in education. Kozol proposes “The point is often made that, even with a genuine equality of schooling for poor children, other forces still would militate against their school performance” (123) He basically says that even if we change the way their schools teaches them that they will have other problems still in their way of getting an education. Kozol says the first thing we need to do to help the schools is my giving them money. I agree with Kozol on this quote. If we fix the school systems, then who is going to fix the way they live? They will still have family problems if they had them to begin with. Just because we fix the schools does not mean it will change their lives or make them learn better. However, if we do give them an education some students could use that as a way to escape from their problems. Education is not fair and equal for everyone.